

HELP! I NEED TO TALK TO MY TEACHER MENTOR:  
EXPLORING EARLY CAREER TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON  
MENTORING CONVERSATIONS

by

SHARON BULLARD HUTCHINS

(Under the Direction of Sally J. Zepeda)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program in one Georgia metropolitan school system. The researcher sought to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations. Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study coupled with field notes taken during classroom observations of early career teachers' classroom practices. Five early career teachers participated in the semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and the constant comparative method. The findings from the early career teacher interviews were summarized into four major themes: (1) Relationship Building is the Foundation of Mentoring Conversations; (2) Mentoring Conversations Provide Clarity that Enhances Understanding; (3) Topics of Mentoring Conversations Influence Teacher Efficacy; and (4) Active Listening During Mentoring Conversations Encourages Implementation of Classroom Practices. The findings from this study contribute to the literature when examining how mentoring conversations relate to

teacher efficacy. This study can assist educational leaders and policymakers learn from early career teachers about the importance of conversations to enhance mentoring programs.

*Keywords:* Coaching conversations, Early career teachers, First year teachers, Mentoring, Mentoring conversations, Mentor training, Teacher retention, Teacher shortage

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my children, Emily and Emerson Hutchins. Thank you for your presence as it motivated me to complete this learning endeavor. My hope is that this dissertation is a testament to Mommy's hard work and perseverance and that it inspires you both to always value education. Thank you for choosing me to be your Mother as motherhood will always be the greatest accomplishment of my life. I love you both very much.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Teachers are leaving the teaching profession at a higher rate than their professional counterparts (Ingersoll et al., 2018). In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic sparked major challenges for the teacher workforce in as much so that the United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona's major focus became collaborating with policymakers for teacher competitive salaries and professional development opportunities to lower teacher attrition rates (Roth & Harris, 2022). Cardona (2023) stated, "It's not only our responsibility but our commitment at the Department of Education to encourage, invest in, and lift up teachers across America. The future of our country and our children's futures depend on it" (para. 2). Cardona and policymakers have realized that with a growing teacher shortage, the future of the nation's student generations is at stake.

In comparison to historic data of the average teacher having 15 years of teaching experience, early career teachers with approximately 5 years of experience are now more representative of the teacher workforce (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Redding & Nguyen, 2020). As experienced teachers are more likely to work in affluent schools because of working conditions that are perceived to be easier, new teachers have a greater likelihood of working in environments where students and their families live in poverty and in which school support structures are limited (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). Toxic school cultures contribute to new teachers leaving the teaching profession at a higher rate than veteran teachers (Redding & Nguyen, 2020; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Many new teachers complain about stress and lack of support

within their first year of teaching and mentoring programs offer emotional, social, and pedagogical support for new teachers through competent and well-trained mentors (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). However, as teacher shortages are growing, the lack of teacher mentors is growing as well.

To increase teacher supply, educational leaders are relying on alternative certification programs that offer convenient pathways for new teachers to transition into the teaching field (Aragon, 2016). Although a quick attempt to fix the problem of teacher shortages, there remains the unsolved solution of high teacher mentor vacancies. Effective teacher mentors usually have at least three years of experience to support beginning teachers with their daily responsibilities and pedagogy. Kim et al. (2017) found that experienced teachers who lacked preparation for advising beginning teachers may contribute to new teacher burnout. Experienced teacher mentors who provide early career teachers with effective advice are needed to continue a strong teacher pipeline.

Past policies have attempted to improve teacher retention. Schools and school districts introduced induction programs to help teachers transition into the teaching field. New teacher induction policies and legislation have steadily gained attention since *A Nation at Risk* (1983). While the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 emphasized testing and accountability measures for student learning, it was not until educational reforms of the Race to the Top Program in 2009 that education stakeholders shifted their attention to teacher and principal effectiveness as a determinant of student achievement (Rodriguez & Swain, 2020). Teacher evaluation became an accountability measure that highlighted the need for teacher professional development. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act illuminated teacher recruitment, preparation, and professional

development. With a push for retention of highly effective teachers, mentoring programs became the focus of new teacher induction designs across the nation.

There are studies that show mentoring programs improve teacher retention. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) reviewed empirical studies that provided evidence of these effects of induction programs. There is notably one study with opposite findings to Ingersoll and Strong (2011). Glazerman et al. (2010) conducted a two-year randomized control trial of teachers in induction programs. The treatment group consisted of teachers who received enhanced mentoring support. The control group consisted of teachers who received district level basic mentoring support. The study concluded that teachers in the treatment groups did not show improvement in their teaching practices or student achievement during their first year. There was also no improvement in student achievement for the teachers of the treatment group in their second year of teaching. The study additionally found that there was no positive impact on teacher retention for teachers in the treatment group.

Critics of the findings of the Glazerman et. al (2010) study claimed that the comparison of the treatment and control groups were similar in that both groups received mentoring support. Critics also claimed that there were not enough differences in mentoring supports between the two groups to determine impact on teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Research from Glazerman et al. (2010) is controversial because the study produced findings from a randomized control trial, an experimental design with a reputation of validity and reliability. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) suggested further research to explain contradictory findings related to the positive effects of induction programs on teacher retention.

More current literature on mentoring programs reveal that teacher mentors play a significant role in teacher retention as they contribute to continuous professional learning for

new teachers (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Squires, 2019). Warsame and Valles (2018) found new teachers who had a school-based mentor who was a fellow teacher were more supported than beginning teachers who had off school campus, district level mentors. In contrast, Hobson (2016) believed off school campus mentors to be beneficial for new teachers as school-based mentors can be judgmental of beginning teachers. Hobson (2016), moreover, positioned that mentors should not be supervisors. Correspondingly, many researchers have reported that school-based mentor matching is important for new teacher mentoring (Kim et al., 2017; Redding & Nguyen, 2020).

To improve the effectiveness of school-based teacher mentors, researchers are recommending schools and school districts invest in teacher mentor training (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Squires, 2019; Wexler, 2020). Teacher mentor training is important to teacher retention. This training is important because it provides an opportunity for mentor teachers to learn how to focus on the well-being of beginning teachers so they may feel engaged in the school community and more satisfied with their jobs (Renbarger & Davis, 2019; Squires, 2019). Despite lack of time and compensation for mentor training (Redding & Nguyen, 2020), the field must pay more attention to the development of teachers mentors as Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) reminded us that teacher mentors must be engaged in “...focusing on high-leverage activities—observation and feedback; analyzing student strengths and needs; discussing instructional issues; and developing a professional growth plan” as a means that “result in improved teacher retention” (p. 18).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Research shows that early career teachers leave the education profession within five years after their first year of teaching, most notably due to stress from lack of experience and isolation

from lack of colleague support (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2013). As the global COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated teacher attrition, more early career teachers are left without a teacher mentor. A high ratio of teacher mentors to mentees perpetuates the teacher shortage as research has determined teacher self-efficacy and stress to have a negative association that ultimately leads to teacher burnout (Kim & Buric, 2019).

In 2016, the Learning Policy Institute issued a report that documented the severity of teacher shortages and in return lack of teacher mentors. Using past educational data and national and state trends, the report estimated 64,000 national teacher vacancies for the 2015-2016 school year and 112,000 national teacher vacancies every school year thereafter until 2018 (Sutcher et al., 2016). In 2017, 109,000 teacher vacancies nationwide were reported for the 2016-2017 school year, an on target estimate of the report's earlier projection (Learning Policy Institute, 2017). Critics claimed the report's estimates were not a true reflection of the nation's teacher shortage as data was collected based on a decrease of the national student-teacher ratio, further increasing the number of unfilled teacher positions. Critics also claimed data did not include all qualified teacher graduates, employed or unemployed for a teaching position (Sutcher et al., 2016). Sutcher et al. (2016) reported the response of The Learning Policy Institute to include the student-teacher ratio was used over an eight-year span instead of one school year and the teacher workforce consists of "qualified individuals willing to offer their services under prevailing wages and conditions" (Sutcher et al., 2016, p. 10).

Detractors who disagree with a national teacher shortage may claim that a lack of teacher mentors exist in specific areas across the nation. A study conducted by Nguyen et al. (2022) highlighted the controversy of national teacher attrition rates. The researchers exposed how teacher vacancy data may be misleading as it varies from state to state and among subject

areas due to a nationwide limit of consistent reporting. With poor reporting, the data of national teacher vacancies is vague. For instance, in the 2019-2020 school year, Georgia had 3,112 teacher vacancies, while 7 other states simply reported more than 1,000 teacher vacancies. The same was reflected in the 2021-2022 school year, where Florida had 3,911 teacher vacancies, while Mississippi and Alabama vaguely reported having more than 3,000 teacher vacancies.

Although national data reporting about teacher attrition is controversial, there is national consensus that there are teacher shortages throughout the nation (Nguyen et al., 2022). Nguyen et al. (2022) concluded that they estimate there are 52,800 teacher vacancies and 163,650 underqualified teachers nationwide. Therefore, the study conducted by Nguyen et al. (2022) further proves the importance of effective teacher mentoring to improve teacher retention regardless of location or content area. In fact, researchers support teacher mentoring as an option to improve teacher shortages in hard to staff environments and high-need subject areas (Yendol-Hoppey et al., 2009).

With strong data of teacher shortages across the nation, policymakers must deliberate remedies to improve teacher retention through a focus on teacher mentor training. Mentor training helps retain new teachers in schools as effective mentors support positive school culture (Squires, 2019). Effective mentoring begins with one-on-one teacher mentor and mentee relationships that can only be accomplished from an improvement of teacher attrition.

Researchers attest teachers' mentors best meet the needs of their mentees through developing a trusting relationship (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Wexler, 2020). Teacher mentors who demonstrate acceptance and understanding to new teachers encourage belonging in a school community. With a sense of belonging, new teachers develop comfortability to perform efficient and effective teaching practices (Wexler, 2020). Research shows trained teacher mentors are

better prepared with effective mentoring practices to help new teachers as they transition into the teaching profession (Daly & Milton, 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). For instance, studies report beginning teachers expressed that mentors who received training on empathetic listening skills were better able to communicate to help manage stress (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Long et al., 2012). It is imperative for policymakers to focus on teacher mentor actions as this focus may be the avenue to explaining and enhancing positive effects of induction programs on teacher retention (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

### **Overview of the Research Site Context**

The present study was undertaken in a middle school in the Great Plains School District (GPSD, a pseudonym), a large metropolitan school system located east of a major southern city. GPSD partners with their schools to provide a research-based, high-quality mentor program that focuses on mentor training. The goal of this system program is to increase mentor and mentee efficacy to help integrate new teachers into the culture of the school and district.

Cedarsville Middle School (CMS, a pseudonym) is a suburban public school within Great Plains School District. After the global COVID-19 pandemic, teacher turnover at CMS has increased significantly. From the 2020-2021 school year to 2022-2023 school year, the number of new teachers have grown by 20%. In a school of approximately 134 teachers, data trends have shown about thirty new teachers need to be hired each year. Teacher turnover has particularly been prevalent in the Special Education and Mathematics Departments.

Fifty percent of the overall new teacher hires from past years have been special education teachers, while new teacher vacancies were at the start of the 2023-2024 school year for mathematics teachers. New teachers often find themselves sharing teacher mentors as veteran

teacher attrition continues to disseminate throughout CMS. To help retain new teachers, Cedarsville Middle School closely follows the model of the district's mentoring program.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. The research aims to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations. Through semi-structured interviews and observation fieldnotes, the contributions of mentoring conversations from the perspectives of early career teachers will be accentuated.

Research positions that the “revolving door” of teachers decelerates with mentoring programs given that new teacher mentoring decreases teacher attrition by 12% compared to attrition in other professions (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Teachers have reported mentoring to be the most important aspect of their first year of teaching because it decreases anxiety and it accelerates learning pedagogy (Richter et al., 2013). This study was designed to explore the phenomena that occur between early career teachers and their experiences from conversations with their mentor.

### **Research Questions**

Because communication between teacher and mentor is a primary feature of mentoring programs, it is significant to understand mentoring conversations and the actions that follow for the benefit of early career teachers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?
2. What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?

3. How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are defined.

Mentoring: a professional and trusting relationship where veteran teachers (early career teacher mentors) collaborate, set goals, and solve problems with early career teachers (mentees) in the workplace (Carr et al., 2017; DeCesare et al., 2016)

New Teacher Mentor: a veteran teacher who provides feedback to early career teacher (mentee) based on observation notes and discussions concerning instructional issues; additionally, a new teacher mentor helps to develop a professional growth plan for their mentee (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019)

Early Career Teacher (ECT): in the context of this study, are new teachers with one to three years of teaching experience within the profession.

Mentoring Conversation: in the context of this study, dialogue between new teacher mentor and early career teacher concerning critical guidance on classroom management, professionalism, planning and preparation, and instruction (Hong & Matsko, 2019).

### **Background of the Study**

The global COVID-19 pandemic has increased recruitment from teacher alternative certification programs such as in Oklahoma, 3,600 emergency teacher certificates were issued during the first quarter of the academic school year (Will, 2022). A lack of teacher preparation has left more new teachers feeling underprepared and isolated, further perpetuating the “revolving door” of teacher attrition (Aragon, 2016; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). To remedy an influx of inexperienced new teachers, new teacher mentors are needed within the education field.

Teachers report stressful working conditions to be one of the main reasons that they leave the teaching profession (Mirra & Rogers, 2020; Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teacher mentors help early career teachers with stressful working conditions through their teacher leadership. Teacher mentors model professionalism and the ability to positively solve instructional issues (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). Teacher mentors observe, model, co-teach, provide feedback, and assist new teachers to reflect on classroom practices (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Wexler, 2020). Teacher mentors often familiarize early career teachers of the school's vision and mission (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). Squires (2019) believed teacher mentors are colleagues that help to positively mold new teachers when they encourage and support diverse teaching styles and professional growth.

To provide early career teachers with teacher mentors, schools and school districts rely on induction programs to help teachers transition into the teaching field. Induction programs vary in their design, execution, and duration, often offering embedded mentoring programs as an initiative to decrease teacher turnover (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017). Induction and mentoring programs are often referred to simultaneously (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Unfortunately, there is no clear evidence of universal induction support for new teacher retention. Goldrick et al. (2012) declared, "too many states that mandate induction do so in the absence of key policy elements like dedicated funding, strong program standards or mentor selection and training requirements" (p. vi). Education policymakers are encouraged to pay more attention to teacher mentor selection and training to improve new teacher retention and sustain the teacher workforce.

Teacher mentor training is beneficial in ensuring mentoring helps new teachers in their professional growth. A study conducted by Daly and Milton (2017) revealed that teacher mentors

benefited from mentor training by participating in their own teacher mentor professional learning community. The professional learning communities provided safe environments where mentor teachers could collaborate with other mentor teachers to discuss effective mentoring practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). With mentor training, mentors are better prepared to help new teachers as they transition into the teaching profession and assimilate into their school's culture (Squires, 2019). It is valuable to the teacher workforce that educational leaders know about the impact of effective training content and processes, such as the effects of mentoring conversation protocols, to assist teachers as they mentor new colleagues.

In the early 1990s, 40% of new teachers participated in a new teacher mentoring program. By the early 2000s, the number of new teachers enrolled in mentoring programs had doubled to 80% (Bartlett & Johnson, 2010). During this time, studies focused on mentor training, specifically conversations between teacher mentors and their mentees. In 2004, Strong and Baron (2004) analyzed 64 conversations between 16 mentor teachers and their mentees. They found the conversations were influenced by a Cognitive Coaching Model training program where mentors learned how to communicate with their mentees through conditionality statements, questions, or recommendations of ideas already seen in classroom practices.

Strong and Baron (2004) reported that when mentors provided mentees with indirect suggestions, new teachers provided elaborated responses. Additionally, new teachers were four times more likely to accept rather than reject their mentor's suggestions when provided with indirect communication. Strong and Baron (2004) encouraged studies of other program training features, along with observations of new teacher classroom practices after mentor conversations, to enhance research outcomes of effective new teacher mentoring.

Carver and Katz (2004) agreed with Strong and Baron (2004) in a later study that recommended mentor training on providing effective feedback to mentees through a set of strategic standards. Unlike Strong and Baron (2004), Carver and Katz (2004) believed a change in expectations of new teacher mentors was needed. Rather than communicate with indirect suggestions, Carver and Katz (2004) asserted mentors should take on an assessment-oriented role with the aim of changing ineffective and inequitable practices of mentees.

Over a decade later, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 brought into focus teacher professional development for the education field. In agreement with Carver and Katz (2004), Goodwin et al. (2015) found mentor teachers assumed an assessment-oriented role. In their study, Goodwin et al. (2015) asked 46 mentor teachers to describe their experiences of effective mentoring. A common theme shared among the mentor teachers was classroom observations. The mentors agreed that after conversations with their mentees about classroom practices, the mentees better understood instructional strategies and were more likely to successfully implement them in their teaching pedagogy. The mentors also shared that without explanation of classroom practices, they believed their mentoring to be less effective for early career teachers.

New teacher mentors are salient in mentoring relationships as they guide topics of conversation (Michailidi & Stavrou, 2021; Strong & Baron, 2004). Through a study of teacher mentor roles in mentoring conversations, Michailidi and Stavrou (2021) found a combination of directive and indirective communication to be effective in mentoring dialogue. Like Goodwin et al. (2015), Michailidi and Stavrou (2021) reported teacher mentors are more direct with their mentees when mentees are less knowledgeable about a topic (i.e., instructional strategies) and more indirect with their mentees when they are more knowledgeable. Michailidi and Stavrou

(2021) asserted that directive communication with the mentee changed over time with the growth of the mentoring relationship.

Despite the type of communication between teacher mentor and mentee, researchers agree that further study is needed on the classroom practices of new teachers after mentoring conversations (Michailidi & Stavrou, 2021; Strong & Baron, 2004). While there are many studies of mentoring conversation with pre-service teachers, there is a lack of research involving mentoring dialogue with early career in-service teachers. As the teacher shortage is becoming more prevalent, it is imperative that more information is known for education policymakers concerning early career teachers' perspectives on mentoring conversations and the effects that the conversations have on their classroom practices. With this information, teacher retention could possibly improve through collective enhancements of mentoring programs across the nation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative study was designed to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. This study was based on interpretivism as interpretivists believe individuals make understandings of context from personal experiences. These understandings are subjective realities as everyone possess multiple perspectives of the world. The qualitative process compliments interpretivist theory as interpretivism values individual experiences through participant observation and interviews (Lather, 2006). The researcher believed it was important to study discourse between early career teachers and their mentors, rather than measure the effects of social interactions, to gain a better understanding of teacher perspectives and experiences (Brinkmann et al., 2020; Klein & Myers, 1999; O'Brien et al., 2014).

Rooted within interpretivism, symbolic interactionism theory uses symbols to explain the interactions of individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2016). It is the meaning of symbols, such as a mentor, that people interpret their environment. Symbolic interactionism theorists believe that individuals conduct actions based on experiences and these actions ultimately detail the operations within a community (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Tracy, 2018). Prasad (2018) believed that negotiated orders balance symbolic interactionism as individuals possess different perspectives about their shared environment. Prasad (2018) further elaborated, “All social realities are therefore negotiated orders built on multiple realities that are tacitly adjusted and refined to make up the day-to-day reality that individuals agree upon” (p. 22). Prasad’s work on negotiated orders aligned with the approach to examining mentoring conversations and how and to what extent early career teachers construct meaning with their mentors.

Social constructivism theorists believed knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Holmes, 2019; Lock, 2006). Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner were pioneers of constructivist theory. Vygotsky extended his beliefs upon Piaget’s cognitive constructivism as he believed that social experiences influenced learning more than cognitive structures (Ruey, 2010). Bruner believed that past experiences could help build new knowledge (Jiang & Perkins, 2013). The researcher examined conversations between early career teachers and their mentors to understand early career teacher cognitive development of teaching practices (Lutz & Huitt, 2004).

Specific aspects of mentoring conversations, such as content and transfer of content to classroom practices, were analyzed as “reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation” (Firestone, 1987, p. 5). In other words, the topic of conversation and the dialogue between mentor and mentee can influence early career teacher

assimilation in the teaching profession through knowledge learned from communication with their mentors.

Sensemaking is situated within social constructivism as researchers have declared “sense” to mean interpretation and “making” to mean the experiences from situations that result in the interpretation (Coburn 2001; Evans, 2007; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Jensen et al., 2009). Weick (1995) described sensemaking as “the process by which people give meaning to experience” (p. 4). Early career teachers possess individual and social experiences from preexisting educational knowledge and practices and from school supports (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Lin, 2000; Siskin, 1994; Spillane 2000; Spillane et al., 2002).

With these experiences, the researcher realized that adult learning theory applies to new teacher mentoring as adults have experienced different past situations and learn best from the experiences of others (Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999; Ziegler & Wenfan, 2001; Zorga, 2002). Past literature recommended education leaders include adult learning in teacher professional development by advocating for new teachers to have mentors (Desimone, 2009; Lambert, 1985; Zepeda, 2017). Teacher mentors use adult learning theories when they actively participate in meaningful conversations with new teachers to help early career teachers remain in the teacher workforce.

An assumption of adult learning is that adults learn best through immediate application (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015). New teacher mentoring offers structured time for new teachers to meet with their mentors to engage in professional learning that as an aspiration can be applied in classroom practices. Knowledge transmission is a learning process that includes mentee receiving knowledge from a mentor. This learning process is best implemented when mentors are guiding mentees on the daily tasks of teaching. Knowledge transformation, often

referred to as constructivist-oriented mentoring, is a learning process where mentor and mentee construct learning together. This learning process typically unfolds through discussion and then the implementation of instructional practices. Conversations between new teachers and their mentors allow knowledge transmission and transformation to occur for application in classroom teaching (Richter et al., 2013). Zepeda (2020) declared that adult learning is the foundation of teacher professional learning and further elaborated that mentoring offers a safe professional learning environment where mentors actively participate to provide feedback and support for new teachers.

### **Significance of the Study**

Since the late 1980s the teacher workforce has significantly changed. According to Ingersoll et al. (2018), while teachers are more diverse and their academic ability has improved, new teachers are more representative of the teaching profession than their veteran teacher colleagues. New teachers are advantageous to the teaching field as they are deemed to be energetic and bring fresh ideas for teaching practices. However, new teachers are typically inexperienced and underprepared for the many challenges of teaching. Ingersoll et al. (2018) reported that most first-year teachers left teaching because of dissatisfactions with working conditions such as salaries, classroom resources, student misbehavior, accountability, opportunity for development, input into decision making, and school leadership. Poor teacher retention undermines new teacher recruitment efforts as a continuous stream of new teachers who lack experience negatively impacts student achievement. To decrease new teacher attrition and to improve student achievement, effective teacher mentoring is needed.

Teacher mentors provide new teachers with emotional and social support (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020) as they engage with colleagues and make meaning of their pedagogical tasks. With a

nurturing teacher mentor, early career teachers are not only engaged with instructional goals, but they also become self-determined through their professional growth (Burger et al., 2021; Hong & Matsko, 2019). Self-determination encourages self-efficacy, a contributing factor to job satisfaction (Renbarger & Davis, 2019). Teacher self-efficacy is the awareness and the belief in one's ability to complete occupational tasks (Bandura, 1994).

A study found teacher self-efficacy increased during preservice preparation but declined during the first year of teaching (Richter et. al, 2013). This finding may be a result of preservice student teaching being new and exciting, coupled with mentoring support from professors, peers, and supervisor teachers (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020). Research indicated when these supports disappear, the reality of isolation and stress emerges, resulting in a significant need for teacher mentoring (Kim et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2013; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Teacher mentors support new teacher self-efficacy by helping beginning teachers manage stress from daily job activities (Lazarides et al., 2020).

Studies have concluded induction and mentoring programs have a positive effect on teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019); however, there is little research about how these effects develop, especially within new teacher mentoring relationships. Lack of time and pay for mentor training was a limitation reported by a study on mentor training for mentor teachers (Redding & Nguyen, 2020). In fact, researchers have reported that school systems across the nation have had challenges implementing induction due to tight budgetary constraints (Glazerman et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018). Additionally, new teacher induction protocols vary from state to state. Goldrick et al. (2012) reported, “no single U.S. state has perfected its induction policy to ensure the provision of high-impact, multi-year induction support for all educators” (p. iv.).

This study sought to examine teacher mentor actions within new teacher induction and to analyze perspectives of early career teachers regarding their conversations with their mentors. This study would allow researchers to determine if the content discussed between a mentor and mentee transfers to teacher self-efficacy manifested through effective classroom practices. In essence, this study adds to the gap in the research concerning teacher mentoring by focusing on implementation of classroom practices after mentoring conversations.

### **Subjectivity**

Throughout my career as a teacher, I have experienced and witnessed situations where teacher mentoring could have altered the outcomes in a positive manner. During my first year of teaching, rather than my school's principal assigning me a mentor, I had to seek an experienced teacher that I thought had the potential to help me begin a successful teaching career. This experience was disheartening and stressful as I relied on many informal teacher mentors for guidance throughout my first year of teaching. I was fortunate to find competent teacher mentors that provided me social, emotional, and pedagogical support. Too many times, however, I have seen this happen to other new teachers who unfortunately do not have mentoring support and leave the teaching profession within their first five years of teaching. I am passionate about this study because research shows that mentoring helps to retain new teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011); however, knowing how mentoring does so needs to be shared with educational administrators and policymakers to enhance mentoring programs for new teachers.

My disciplinary training includes traditional teacher preparation. My educational background provides me with the experience of teaching. My involvement in teaching will provide me with a clear understanding of what teachers experience as they transition from preservice to in-service teaching. Being a teacher will also help me to understand the needs of

first year teachers. As the lead teacher mentor facilitator of the mentoring program at the research site, I will assist in assigning mentor teachers to new teachers. I will also promote suggested areas of discussion during mentoring conversations through professional development sessions with mentor teachers. In this position, I will not have any control on topical areas of dialogue between mentor teachers and their early career teacher mentee. With my experience and training, I believe participants will be transparent with me in communicating their thoughts about how their mentor is helping them during their first year of teaching.

### **Assumptions of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. It was first assumed that participants in this study were within a mentoring relationship as an early career teacher. Because participants agreed to be a part of this study, an assumption was that participants would provide accurate descriptions of their perspectives and experiences of teacher mentoring. Additionally, the researcher believed the following assumptions to be true:

- Participants in this study were open about conversation topics within their mentoring relationship and the actions that occurred after mentoring conversations.
- Confidentiality of participant identities would preserve honesty in responses to interview questions.
- The selected methodology for this study was well-designed and comprehensively addressed the research questions.
- The number of interviews were sufficient to provide rich data leading to analysis.

- The researcher's role as teacher would ease pressure for participants to avoid sharing inaccurate perspectives and experiences of teacher mentoring that negatively contribute to research.

Although these assumptions do not present any unethical approaches, there are limitations.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was that participants were selected from one school in one school district. Therefore, the generalization of the findings was restricted to one site setting. The setting of one school also limited the number of studied mentoring relationships due to the low number of early career teachers within the school. Within the context of this study, an early career teacher was defined as a new teacher with one to three years of teaching experience within the teaching profession. Participants were selected from one school with the intentions that sacred social interactions among participants would influence their close attention to teacher mentoring to assist in their decision to remain in the teaching profession and ultimately help them pass along their successes to future first year teachers.

Additionally, although the interviews followed the same protocol with each participant, it was a limitation that the attitudes and confidence levels of the participants could have impacted their responses to questions. It is hoped that the interview questions highlighted the connection between new teacher mentoring and teacher retention as a benefit for participants. It is expected that this study would ultimately impact the teaching profession in this school by providing knowledge that improves teacher attrition.

### **Overview of the Research Procedures**

A case study was chosen as the qualitative design of studying conversations between early career teachers and their mentors. Flyvbjerg (2006) described the case study as a detailed

investigation of phenomena through real life narratives to explain complex issues such as how early career teachers learn from mentoring experiences. For this qualitative study, the setting was a K-12 public middle school inside a large Georgia metropolitan school system.

The methods that were used to generate data for the study included semi-structured interviews and observation fieldnotes. All interviews and observations were professionally transcribed and analyzed. Interviews were held with five early career teachers. All five participants were interviewed using protocols that addressed mentoring conversation topics and classroom practices.

Participants for this case study were selected based on the following criteria: (1) the participants worked as a full-time early career teacher at Cedarsville Middle School (a pseudonym) during the 2023-2024 school year; (2) the participants actively engaged in Cedarsville Middle School mentoring program activities; and (3) the participants were willing to be interviewed about the conversations and learning experiences of their mentoring relationship.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter 1 presents the introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, and background of the study. Additionally, Chapter 1 highlights the theoretical framework, the researcher's subjectivity, assumptions of the study, limitations of the study, and overview of research procedures. Chapter 2 provides a review of the related literature and research about teacher mentoring conversations with early career teachers. Chapter 3 defines the research design, methodology and data analysis processes used to guide this study. Chapter 4 presents findings from the research. Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive analysis with specific themes from the data presented in Chapter 4. Lastly, Chapter 6 summarizes the study, provides

discussion about the findings from the research questions, offers implications for current practices, and suggestions for future research and policy-making efforts.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

The nation's teacher shortage is a product of high teacher attrition (Roth & Harris, 2022). Stress and lack of support are the leading causes for early career teachers leaving the education profession within five years after their first year of teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2013). Teacher burnout is decreased by teacher mentoring as teacher mentoring helps new teachers feel competent in their teaching abilities and satisfied with their jobs (Renbarger & Davis, 2019).

Research positions that the “revolving door” of teachers decelerates with mentoring programs given that this type of support decreases teacher attrition by 12% compared to attrition in other professions (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Teachers have reported mentoring to be one of the most important aspects of their first year in the profession because it decreases anxiety and it accelerates learning pedagogy (Richter et al., 2013). This study was designed to explore the phenomena that occur between early career teachers and their experiences from conversations with their mentor.

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. The research aims to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations. Through semi-structured interviews and observation fieldnotes, the contributions of mentoring conversations from the perspectives of early career teachers were examined. Because communication between teacher and mentor is a primary feature of mentoring programs, it is

significant to understand mentoring conversations and the actions that follow for the benefit of early career teachers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?
2. What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?
3. How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?

This chapter presented an overview of the seven areas of literature this study is based including: (1) mentoring and its components, (2) mentoring conversations, (3) context of school supports, (4) adult learning theory and the early career teacher, (5) professional job embedded learning, and (6) the roles of new teacher mentors. Embedded in each section was a critique of the literature.

### **Mentoring and Its Components**

Studies have concluded induction and mentoring programs have a positive effect on teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019). This section of the literature review focused on relationship building, goal setting conversations, and conversations that promote reflection and inquiry.

#### *Relationship Building*

Teacher mentoring is influential to teacher retention as it helps early career teachers build relationships with teacher colleagues. Teacher well-being is nurtured through positive emotions and relationships. When new teachers have a sense of well-being through relationships with colleagues (März & Kelchtermans, 2020), their work becomes meaningful, and they are better

equipped to fulfill their purpose of teaching (Squires, 2019). With having a positive end goal in mind, mentoring relationships increase engagement that promote productive work environments and improve teacher attrition (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Squires, 2019).

It is imperative that through teacher mentoring, strong relationships are developed as other teacher mentoring components depend on the social interaction between early career teachers and their professional peers. Such relationships are valuable and more dependable than a checklist of mandates funded by local and state education departments. A study conducted by Paula and Gr̃nfeldt (2018) found that participants who left the teaching profession did not feel supported by state induction efforts because of a lack of funding. Another study revealed that teacher mentors with too many assigned mentees did not have the time to develop relationships and hence negatively impacted new teacher retention (Rockoff, 2008). Genuine consultation between new teachers and their mentors does not require monetary capital, in that relationship building is a key influence to improve teacher retention (Sikma, 2019).

Early career teachers seek relationships with colleagues who they deem are similar in personality and who can ultimately help satisfy their needs (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Shanks et al., 2020). Through the Personal Interpretive Framework, explained by März and Kelchtermans (2020), early career teachers engage with mentors through professional self-understanding and their subjective educational theory. It is how new teachers see themselves or their self-image and their professional knowledge from preservice preparation that influences new teachers' selection of mentors who help them to gain social capital.

Relationships are built on social capital theory (Sikma, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020). Social capital theory discusses the gain of relationships, resources, and roles in organizations. Within the teaching profession, relationships can lead to obtaining curriculum

resources, experiential knowledge, and emotional support. According to Sikma (2019), within relationships, early career teachers can earn contextual and relational capital or the understanding of how subgroups such as professional learning communities operate within their school while receiving acceptance from experienced colleagues within the group. The most valuable social capital to early career teachers is what the teacher needs at the right time during their first year of teaching (März & Kelchtermans, 2020). A study conducted by März and Kelchtermans (2020) illustrated that new teachers' initial need for their first year of teaching is often not curriculum related, rather early career teachers seek relationships with colleagues who will help with urgent topics such as classroom management.

New teachers are not restricted to building relationships with assigned mentors (Strong, 2009). In fact, if personality and a sense of need is not evident from the mentor, early career teachers will seek informal teacher mentors (Shanks et al., 2020). März and Kelchtermans (2020) stated early career teachers often rely on other early career teachers during the beginning of their inaugural year of teaching because they share commonalities. While informal mentors are consulted during the beginning of the year, formal mentors are consulted as the year progresses when new teachers become more settled throughout the school year and topics such as pedagogy and other professional responsibilities arise (März & Kelchtermans, 2020).

Moir (1999) explained the five stages of a teacher's first year of teaching as anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, and reflection. It is during the survival and disillusionment stages that teachers seek their formal mentors as they are looking for support from colleagues who will help them persevere through teaching challenges and in times of despair. März and Kelchtermans (2020) attested that new teachers do not seek mentoring from their school principal as they do not want to appear incompetent. Additionally, the principal role

as evaluator compromises authentic relationships with early career teachers (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020). Sikma (2019) confirmed that a combination of formal and informal mentoring can help with new teacher psychosocial needs.

Whether meeting with a formal or informal mentor, relationship building between new teacher mentor and mentee typically occurs when needed. As more help is needed at the beginning of the year, more informal meetings may take place; however, throughout the year, denser topics may take longer to discuss that call for formal meetings. Hong and Matsko (2019) concluded from their study of high-quality mentoring that biweekly meetings are ideal for effective mentoring and relationship building to transpire.

Relationship building contributes to a better understanding of the purpose of this study as it is important to understand discussion between early career teachers and their mentors and the meaning that early career teachers made from the conversations. According to the Personal Interpretive Framework (März & Kelchtermans, 2020), new teachers have a strong desire to be a great teacher. Therefore, new teachers yearn for competent teacher mentors to emulate and to seek counsel.

When early career teachers build relationships with these mentors, their self-esteem and the ability to evaluate themselves improves. Self-confidence and self-evaluation are important to know for this study as new teacher self-awareness at the start of their career influences who they seek for advice. Their self-image shapes their perspective about their conversations with their mentors that helps one make sense of how early career teachers use mentoring conversations in their classroom practices. It is ultimately within mentoring relationships that early career teachers become motivated to use their pedagogical competencies for effective instruction.

Qualities of a successful early career teacher are manifested through goal setting conversations with teacher mentors.

### *Goal Setting Conversations*

It is the art of mentoring conversations that mindsets are changed through setting and achieving goals. Zepeda et al. (2019) advocated that teacher mentors should plan conversations with the end goal in mind to support professional development for early career teachers. From getting to know teachers' values and beliefs, strengths and weaknesses, teaching successes and challenges, mentors can engage in powerful conversations with new teachers that promote goal attainment.

When setting goals for early career teachers, conversations should be engaging with a purpose. Teacher mentors should actively listen, ask questions, and provide expertise. Agreement of the goal must be established from both mentor and mentee. Celebrations of successes toward achieving goals need to be recognized (Zepeda et al., 2019). With celebrations, new teachers feel capable of their teaching abilities and encouraged to continue to improve their craft of teaching.

Zepeda et al. (2019) warned us that successes may look different for early career teachers and their mentors and such a variety in measures of accomplishments need to be agreed on during early discussion. Zepeda et al. (2019) emphasized that often teachers and their support providers do not see goals the same and hence, conversations are needed where goals should be explicit, practical, and relevant to both educators.

Conversations with the purpose of pedagogical goal setting can be challenging. Research shows that early career teachers are most likely concerned with pedagogy as the year progresses into their reflection stage of new teacher development (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Moir, 1999;

Shanks et al., 2020). With a lack of teaching experience, comprehensible communication, and mutual satisfaction, conversations concerning pedagogical goal setting for *first year* early career teacher mentoring may be less influential for teacher retention than conversations that offer emotional and moral support, support that Grossman et al. (2012) declared must be established before instructional support.

Early career teachers have achieved their goals when they are able to provide in-depth responses that show critical thought and demonstrate metacognition of the skills of teaching (Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018). Upon achieving their goals, early career teachers have succeeded in developing an enhanced change in their mindset as a pedagogical competence has transpired. For the purpose of this study, understanding goal settings conversations help one comprehend how early career teachers use mentoring conversations in their classroom practices.

Conversations are impactful for new teachers as they allow for goal setting to take place. Early career teachers and their mentors must agree on the goal that is to be achieved. Being aware of the stages of new teacher development supports the purpose of the present study by helping one understand common topical areas that may be discussed as goals for new teachers throughout the year. Meaningful conversations that support instructional goals are illustrated through reflective inquiry.

#### *Conversations That Promote Reflection and Inquiry*

Reflective inquiry allows for mentor teachers to pose questions that call for critical reflection by early career teachers. It is through critical reflection that new teachers' professional dispositions change and their professional capital improves. New teachers become more confident, committed teachers that develop effective judgment and decision-making skills

(Nolan & Molla, 2018). Critical reflection among early career teachers helps with teacher retention as it encourages new teachers to think about acceptance and adaptation to the norms of teaching (Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020). For instance, early career teachers become more self-aware of their pedagogical competencies and are able to self-evaluate their commitment to the teaching profession.

Nolan and Molla (2018) shared a participant's thoughts of the importance of self-awareness from critical reflection,

[...] teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge – and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. [...] In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my own unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (p. 266)

Early career teacher self-awareness and critical reflection can also enhance the teaching workforce by teachers desiring to be a catalyst of change for the teaching profession through seeking advanced qualifications. The present study can hopefully shed light on the importance of conversations that promote critical reflection as early career teachers make meaning of their conversations with their mentors.

Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) claimed mentor teachers encourage early career teachers to think about their teaching issues and engage in problem solving strategies through purposeful discussion. Glanz and Zepeda (2016) provided an example of how conversations that promote reflective inquiry help teachers work toward accomplishing the goal of inquiry teaching.

Inquiry teaching occurs when teachers are able to help students build on their prior knowledge from class discussion and critical thinking. The teacher must be disciplined to facilitate the lesson through questioning students rather than providing students with answers. Such discipline from the teacher takes skill and experience. In helping teachers to achieve inquiry teaching, conversations that promote reflective inquiry are needed.

The objective of the mentoring conversation, like reflective inquiry, drives the type of questions that mentor teachers ask new teachers. It is worth noting that the type of dialogue with early career teachers that happens throughout the year changes as early career teachers grow and develop their professional identity. Research has revealed that more direct communication is needed from teacher mentors at the beginning of the year as opposed to indirect communication as the year progresses (Beek et al., 2019; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Michailidi & Stavrou, 2021; Strong & Baron, 2004). In other words, mentors should model metacognitive critical reflection for early career teachers during the beginning of their teaching by asking questions that allow *mentors* to imperatively share their expertise with their mentees. During later months within the year of teaching, mentors should ask early career teachers rhetorical questions that facilitate reflection and discussion.

Conversations that promote reflection and inquiry help to make clearer the purpose of the present study by highlighting how teacher mentors scaffold their mentees to discuss identified problem areas and seek solutions through dialogue. Early career teachers make meaning of their learning when they are able to self-evaluate their problem-solving strategy. Thoughtful conversations frame the study's overall research questions by positioning sense-making and how early career teachers use their mentoring conversations in their classroom practices.

## **Mentoring Conversations**

Conversations are an aspect of teacher mentoring that is influential to teacher retention. Pletcher et al. (2019) declared learning is more effective when individuals are encouraged to think and talk about their experiences. Heikkinen et al. (2018) believed conversations stemmed from the theory of communicative action, which describes conversations as being open, free, and strategic. Zepeda et al. (2019) reminded us that strategic conversations are clear, realistic, appropriate, flexible, and timely, more commonly referred to as C.R.A.F.T. conversations. Zepeda et al. (2019) defined C.R.A.F.T. conversations as:

a skillful formal or informal oral exchange to explore perspectives and ideas, uncover misconceptions, and collaboratively problem-solve in a clear, realistic, appropriate, flexible, and timely fashion; a conversation that builds capacity, invokes change, promotes collaboration, prioritizes celebrations. (p. 5)

Conversations that are strategically meaningful involve positive people who care to go beyond emotional support to understand and build cognitive development to ultimately decrease teacher attrition (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Sheridan & Young, 2017; Zepeda et al., 2019).

Understanding is achieved through conversations. Mezirow (2000) stated, “Discourse is not a war or a debate; it is a conscientious effort to find agreement, to build a new understanding” (p. 170). Conversations support critical thinking, innovation, and discovery (Jones et al., 2019). Positive dialogue in mentoring relationships is essential for teacher professional learning, often acting as a two-way street promoting mutual engagement of mentor and mentee (Jones et al., 2019; Sheridan & Young, 2017). Mutual learning builds an authentic professional learning community that helps early career teachers trust and listen to their mentors (Jones et al., 2019).

Early career teachers begin to know their teacher mentors and colleagues through dialogue that elicits teacher collaboration. Through conversations, new teachers work with their teacher mentors as “thought partners” (Zepeda et al., 2019), seeking advice on topics such as classroom management, instructional planning, instructional strategies, professional responsibilities, curriculum, and communication with parents (Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020).

A study conducted by Hong and Matsko (2019) revealed that classroom management was the highest discussed topic between early career teachers and their mentors followed by curriculum and professional responsibilities. The study conducted by Hong and Matsko (2019) sheds light on the purpose of this study as it helps one understand common topical areas discussed between early career teachers and their mentors. These topics are frequently discussed within professional learning communities and during teacher common planning time. Zepeda et al. (2019) advised school administrators to provide their teachers “space and time to work as a team” (p. 12) that ultimately prevents new teacher isolation.

When schools have a positive professional learning culture that is supportive of instruction, conversations between early career teachers and their mentors are based more on pedagogy rather than social emotions. This claim is connected to school principals being advised to seek hiring of quality new teachers who are pedagogically prepared and therefore need instructional support more than emotional support (Grossman et al., 2012). Teacher preparation is essential for this present study as it impacts early career teachers’ perspective about their conversations with their mentors which then influences topics discussed during conversations and implementation of these topics in their classroom practices.

Grossman et al. (2012) affirmed necessary emotional support will naturally occur in schools with positive school cultures and that instructional support will take more intentional time through thoughtful dialogue. As teachers discuss instruction, conversations can be authentically filled with a cycle of pedagogical questions that bring about solutions and generate additional pedagogical questions (Sheridan & Young, 2017). These pedagogical questions prompt new teachers to engage in C.R.A.F.T. conversations (Zepeda et al., 2019).

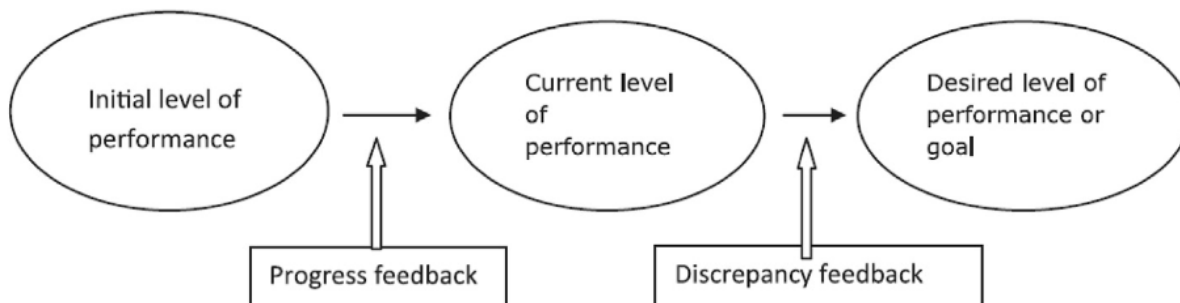
C.R.A.F.T. conversations between early career teachers and their mentors need to be honest and truthful to allow new teachers to take part in deep reflection (Sheridan & Young, 2017). Such deep reflection may occur during dilemmas that arise from teaching. Early career teachers must learn the value of dilemmas as feelings of discomfort from teaching challenges awaken reflection of practice and professional knowledge (Nolan & Molla, 2018). From feelings of discomfort, early career teachers are able to learn more about their teacher identity and if they can be vulnerable in conversations with their mentor, who is genuine and trustworthy with their responses and actions (Sheridan & Young, 2017).

Conversations are most beneficial to new teachers when they are seen as equals with their mentors. Mutual engagement in mentoring relationships promotes new teacher acceptance. With acceptance, early career teachers are more committed to the opportunities that merge theory with practice (Sheridan & Young, 2017). As early career teachers build capacity, room for positive change and recognizing celebrations along the way ensue (Zepeda et al., 2019). For instance, as new teachers further learn instructional practices from experience, debriefs of classroom observations' successes and areas of growth become more meaningful for teacher professional development. C.R.A.F.T. conversations cater to individual teacher's needs by understanding their mindsets and celebration of their achievements (Zepeda et al., 2019).

Research attests that conversations after new teacher classroom observations should provide comprehensive feedback from mentor teachers (Beek et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019). Beek et al. (2019) and Jones et al. (2019) claim feedback should be focused on early career teacher performance, goals, or student achievement and discussed in a manner for new teachers to understand. While teacher mentors should gradually release their feedback, mentors should avoid nonspecific short phrases in conversations such as “Great Job!” or “Not Quite” (Beek et al., 2019). Beek et al. (2019) declared that conversational feedback should transition from progress to discrepancy feedback in a mentoring relationship. As depicted in Figure 2.1, it is ideal for progress feedback to be given immediately after classroom observations and discrepancy feedback to be initiated during formal conversations to promote new teacher long-term goal attainment.

**Figure 2.1**

*Progress and Discrepancy Feedback*



*Note.* Adapted from Beek et al. (2019).

Conversations that cater to psychological needs within teacher mentoring are influential to teacher retention. Conversations enhance relationship building between early career teachers and their mentors (Zepeda et al., 2019). Serving the purpose of this study, examining conversations can help one understand common topical areas discussed between early career

teachers and their mentors and help explore the meanings that early career teachers made these conversations. It is the context of school supports that encourage effective mentoring conversations to occur.

### **Context of School Supports**

The context of school supports is important for teacher mentoring because supports help teachers flourish in their teaching career. Early career teachers begin their teaching career at different stages of development with different needs and different learning styles (Hong & Matsko, 2019). Providing supports during these different stages of development sets clear guidelines for new teachers to understand the craft of teaching. These guidelines prevent confusion of teaching expectations (Hairon et al., 2020). This section of the literature review focused on social networks to connect teachers, principal supports, sense of belonging, and professional learning communities for early career teachers.

#### *Social Networks to Connect Teachers*

Social network theory involves the ties between people, groups, and organizations (März & Kelchtermans, 2020). Within the teaching profession, social network theory is found in school supports, such as a school's sense of community and trust, assistance from the principal, and professional learning communities (PLCs) (Sikma, 2019). The context of school supports provides a breeding ground for relationship building between early career teachers and their mentors (Shanks et al., 2020). Goldrick et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of school supports when they explained,

Inducting new teachers into a weak professional community will limit the impact of high quality induction. Weak professional environments rob new teachers of the opportunity to achieve their full potential, or push good new teachers to schools with a stronger

professional community or out of the teaching profession entirely. (para. v.)

School supports that are positive allow for productive relationships to develop for new teachers.

Sikma (2019) indicated positive networks have both new and experienced teachers.

Sikma's study, similar to Reitman and Karge (2019), found that formal and informal structures from the integrated professional culture supported relationship building for early career teachers.

As novice and veteran teachers are from different generations, they can offer different resources and views of teaching for new teachers (Shanks et al., 2020). In return, early career teachers have a larger network of colleagues to seek help for their many different needs. März and

Kelchtermans (2020) concluded that schools also can benefit from new teachers' perspectives found in mentoring relationships. Positive social networks within schools are a product of effective principal supports.

### *Principal Supports*

School principals are at the heart of providing early career teachers with supports that cater to new teachers' needs and learning styles. Principal supports help teachers assimilate into teaching (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020) as was evident in the study conducted by Hong and Matsko (2019) in the Chicago Public Schools' new teacher mentoring program. Hong and Matsko (2019) found that with strong principal leadership and high-quality mentoring, organizational commitment increased for early career teachers ultimately enhancing the education field.

Principals can encourage high-quality mentoring by providing "packaged" supports, such as teacher supervision, curriculum resources, professional learning communities, reduced teaching assignments, incentives for participation in mentoring activities, and professional development opportunities (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Shanks et al., 2020). These supports, combined or "packaged," are usually offered through a mentoring program.

Similar to Ingersoll and Strong (2011), who found “packaged” supports to be beneficial for new teacher retention, Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) concluded identical findings for an over five-year study. Ronfeldt and McQueen (2017) deemed “comprehensive” supports as potentially including supportive administration, teacher collaboration, and extra resources. Long et. al (2012) advocated the quality of early career teacher supports within mentoring programs are more important than quantity of new teacher supports, although Bullough (2012) believed with more teacher supports, teacher retention increases.

Principals may be the most beneficial to new teachers when they act as indirect facilitators of mentoring programs. As facilitators, school principals ensure fulfillment of the program by conducting mentor matching based on content, personality, experience, and proximity (Lozinak, 2016; Shanks et al., 2020). Principals also guarantee structured mentoring by scheduling time for new teachers to meet with teacher mentors (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Shanks et al., 2020). Redding and Nguyen (2020) reported mentor teachers complained about the lack of time available for them to engage in mentoring. Ewing (2021) suggested school principals to consider hiring retired educators as part-time early career teacher mentors. This is a resourceful suggestion that compliments Hong and Matsko (2020) declaration that structured mentoring meetings between new teachers and their mentors should be twice a week.

Principals have the autonomy to implement distributed leadership among the school that offers early career teachers more structure in seeking help from mentors (Anthony et al., 2019). Distributed leadership allocates leadership responsibilities to teacher leaders within the school (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013). For instance, while a new teacher may have an assigned mentor or an informal mentor, a teacher leader appointed by the school principal that facilitates the mentoring program may assign more than one mentor to the early career teacher that

specializes in different areas. While this may naturally occur during distributed mentorship, it is the principal's leadership philosophy that offers more structure that benefits new teachers' professional growth.

Principal leadership is such a strong indicator of teacher retention, that research has shown even without new teacher mentoring supports, principals alone influence teacher job satisfaction (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Waterman & He, 2011). Research ultimately reveals that early career teachers' decisions to remain at their school are connected to principal leadership and their impact for a positive school culture (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Kutsyuruba et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2019). In her study, Sikma (2019) provided excerpts of new teachers' excitement as they expressed how their school principals' internal school supports continued to external school supports. The participants explained how the time spent with colleagues outside of school enhanced their sense of belonging.

### *Sense of Belonging*

Sense of belonging is a product of teacher mentoring and therefore is essential to teacher retention. Bjorklund et al. (2020) promoted that a sense of belonging is a natural human need and contributes to a teacher's self-image. Sense of belonging is supported through authentic relationships that allow for an emotional connection to the art of teaching. It is with this emotional connection that job performance improves, teacher retention increases, and most importantly, the teaching profession is enhanced by competent professionals (Grossman et al., 2012; Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Reitman & Karge, 2019; Sikma, 2019).

As evident from the teachers in Sikma's (2019) study, relationships with positive teacher mentors help early career teachers fit in a school's community and increase engagement with

colleagues. Teacher mentoring helps early career teachers feel they have a purpose for teaching as a sense of belonging makes it easier for early career teachers to communicate and seek support from their mentors as well as be more encouraged to learn from their teacher peers (Bjorklund et al., 2020). Sense of belonging promotes new teacher empowerment and resilience, especially within professional learning communities.

### *Professional Learning Communities for Early Career Teachers*

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are safe environments in which early career teachers can collaborate with mentor teachers for their personalized professional development by engaging in reflective dialogue about lesson plans, instructional strategies, and student data to improve student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). PLCs improve early career teacher self-efficacy through individualized professional learning. A study conducted by Jones and Thessin (2017) found that differentiation of professional learning communities is important for early career teachers. Jones and Thessin (2017) described differentiating PLCs as, "...each member of the team is a contributing participant and has their needs met, regardless of proficiency level as a teacher" (p. 235).

When school principals establish a school culture of professional learning, integrated professional learning communities (PLCs) arise that allow for distributed mentorship (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Sikma, 2019). März and Kelchtermans (2020) and Strong (2009) proposed distributed mentorship within integrated professional cultures as an opportunity for early career teachers to build relationships with different teacher peers within groups. Researchers agree that early career teachers do not have to be supported by one assigned mentor (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Strong, 2009). Within PLCs spread across the school faculty, distributed mentorship provides new teachers with opportunities to consult formal and informal mentors.

With early career teachers having different strengths and weaknesses, the purpose of PLCs is always ongoing to improve new teacher self-efficacy and ultimately student achievement. Serving the purpose of this study, understanding who early career teachers may seek for advice within PLCs help make sense of how early career teachers use mentoring conversations for their classroom practices. As PLCs support professional learning for new teachers, it is important to understand how early career teachers learn through adult learning theory.

### **Adult Learning Theory and The Early Career Teacher**

Learning occurs in different ways and in different places. Different from child learning, where children are given information to learn, adult learning theory is influenced by the world we live in as it is solely based on adult choices and experiences (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Similar to interpretivists, adult learning educators believe individuals make understandings of context from personal experiences. Understanding from these experiences are subjective realities that are constructed together to produce new knowledge (Prasad, 2018).

Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner were pioneers of constructivist theory. Vygotsky extended his beliefs based on Piaget's cognitive constructivism as he believed that social experiences influenced learning more than cognitive structures (Ruey, 2010). Bruner believed that past experiences could help build new knowledge (Jiang & Perkins, 2013). Adult learning theory applies to early career teacher mentoring as adults have experienced different past situations and learn best from the experiences of others (Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999; Ziegler & Wenfan, 2001; Zorga, 2002). This section of the literature review focused on formal and informal learning, adult learning and early career teachers, transformational learning for the early career teacher, and transformative mentoring.

### *Formal and Informal Learning*

Adult learning occurs in formal and informal settings. One may often think of adult learning as formal postsecondary education, such as traditional teacher preparation courses, alternative certification classes, or a professional learning series. However, because adult learning is based on experiences, adults may also learn in informal settings (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Relationships with teacher mentors provide an informal setting where early career teachers can learn about the world of teaching.

Informal learning, or self-directed learning, is the most common learning within adult learning theory. Contrary to popular belief, self-directed learning does not occur on an individual basis. Informal learning occurs in daily settings with other individuals and in conjunction with formal settings, 70% of its time being in the workplace (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Informal learning supports this study by helping one understand conversations between early career teachers and their mentors and the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations.

As new teachers transition from preservice to in service teachers, they often use clusters of their learning for professional growth. Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) explained Spear's model by stating, "Rather, information gathered through one set of activities (one cluster) is stored until it fits in with other ideas and resources on the same topic gleaned from one or more additional clusters of activities" (p. 112). Information that early career teachers learn before becoming a teacher is stored until elicited by mentors through formal or informal conversations about teaching.

A type of informal learning that is prevalent in teacher mentoring conversations is indigenous learning. Indigenous learning is adult learning that occurs in a culture, such as a

school that values professional learning through teacher mentoring. Indigenous learning occurs in four stages. Stage one is incorporation of techniques that support an activity as conversations support teacher mentoring. Stage two is formally learning about the techniques to better support the activity as mentor training can enhance conversations within mentoring relationships. Finally, stages three and four support development of systems to promote proficiency of the activity such as research on mentoring conversation frameworks (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Knowles (1980) proposed six assumptions of adult learning based on his research of andragogy, or “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). These assumptions include:

- As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being.
- An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource of learning.
- The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental task of his or her social role.
- There is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Thus, an adult is more problem centered than subject centered in learning. (Knowles, 1980, p. 44)

Later, Knowles (1984) added two additional assumptions,

- The most potent motivations are internal rather than external (Knowles, 1984, p. 12).
- Adults need to know why they need to learn something (Knowles, 1984).

Understanding adult learning theory is important because it helps them to make sense of changing circumstances. From information learned during childhood, adults continue to build

their knowledge from choices and experiences through fixed and flexible settings. It is this knowledge that helps adults keep pace with changes in society. This leads adult education to take “... ‘life-long learning’ as its motto” (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020, p. 5). Adult learning is valuable for teacher mentoring as teaching is forever changing, inducing teacher mentors to help early career teachers learn in formal or informal settings.

### *Adult Learning and Early Career Teachers*

How adults learn is important for new teacher mentoring because adult learning consists of having a choice of what is learned, how it is learned, and from what opportunities are presented (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Teacher mentoring allows for new teachers to consult mentors concerning a plethora of teaching topics for professional development through formal and informal relationships.

Adult learning theory is most beneficial in teacher mentoring when prior knowledge of early career teachers is initially acknowledged. As adult learning is continuous lifelong learning, early career teachers must first see themselves as “active learners,” or individuals who have consistently engaged in learning (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Teacher mentors take part in adult learning when they acknowledge new teachers’ past experiences with teaching, whether it is recognizing their perspective of teaching or their developed teaching philosophy from former teacher preparation courses. It is important for mentors to know and value the experiences of new teachers they support (März & Kelchtermans, 2020). The experiences at the start of the novices’ career influences their perspective about their conversations with their mentors. When their perspective are recognized, early career teachers feel valued, competent, and open to transformational learning with their mentors.

### *Transformational Learning for the Early Career Teacher*

Transformational learning, often referred to as transformative learning, is a form of adult learning and is rooted in cognitive development. Transformational learning changes one's self-identity and perspective of society through critical reflection and actions. Personal transformation occurs by being surrounded by like-minded people, such as in a professional learning community or a mentoring relationship. Teacher mentors help new teachers develop new understandings of teaching that eventually change their habits of mind (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Early career teachers make sense of experiences with their mentors for future action, better known as the Mezirow's Psychocritical Approach (Mezirow, 2000).

Changes in future action do not always occur solely from past experiences. Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) affirm that encountering dilemmas help one to implement change. Change occurs through initially being aware of the change, being with others that agree with the change, and developing actions to implement the change (Mezirow, 2000). Mentor teachers help new teachers enact change through critical reflection (Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018). For instance, as mentor teachers discuss classroom management with new teachers from observations, they help early career teachers become aware of poor classroom management choices and ways to promote an environment with positive student behaviors. As early career teachers think about their problematic classroom management, or content reflection, they begin to engage in problem solving strategies with their mentors, or process reflection, to implement immediate action for improvement. An assumption of adult learning is adults focus on problem solving for immediate application (Knowles, 1980).

Adults learn best through immediate application (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015).

New teacher mentoring offers structured time for new teachers to meet with their mentors to discuss dilemmas and actions for changes (Hong & Matsko, 2019). Knowledge transmission is a learning process that includes mentee receiving knowledge from a mentor. This learning process is best implemented when mentors are guiding mentees on daily tasks of teaching. Knowledge transformation, often referred to as constructivist-oriented mentoring, is a learning process where mentor and mentee construct learning together (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018). This learning process is best implemented in activities such as discussing implementation of instructional practices (Richter et al., 2013; Wexlar, 2020). Teacher mentors who encourage mentees to video record lessons and discuss their reflection of the lesson offer constructivist-oriented mentoring experiences.

Grow’s Staged Self-Directed Learning Model illustrated in Table 2.1 highlights how teacher mentors support transformational learning in conversations with early career teachers.

**Table 2.1**

*Grow’s Staged Self-Directed Learning Model*

Stage	Early Career Teacher	Teacher Mentor	Examples
Stage 1	Dependent	Authority Coach	Introductory material. Lecture. Drill.
Stage 2	Interested	Motivator, Guide	Immediate correction. Intermedia material. Lecture-decision. Applying the basics in a stimulating way. Instructor as motivator.
Stage 3	Involved	Facilitator	Application of material. Team working clearly with instructor on real problems. Critical thinking.

Stage	Early Career Teacher	Teacher Mentor	Examples
Stage 4	Self-Directed	Consultant, Delegator	Independent projects. Student-directed discussion. Discovery learning. Instructor as expert, consultant, and monitor.

*Note.* Adapted from Merriam and Baumgartner (2020).

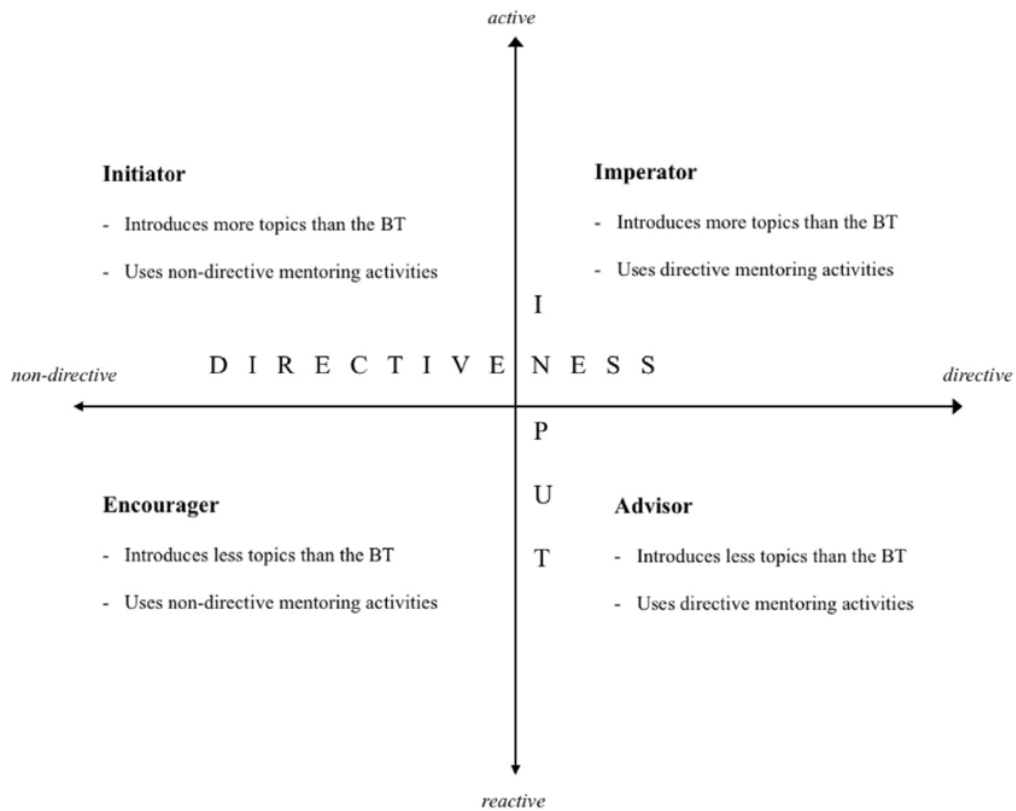
As the stages advance to self-directed learning, teacher mentors take on different roles with each role being less authoritarian and more authoritative (Long et al., 2012). During the beginning of the first year for early career teachers, teacher mentors may ask questions that allow mentors to be the expert and share their expertise with their mentees. As the year progresses, mentors may ask new teachers rhetorical questions that facilitate or delegate discussion with their mentees. Mentor teacher involvement throughout new teacher stages of development is an assumption of adult learning as early career teachers become more self-directed learners (Knowles, 1980).

Beek et al. (2019) described similar mentor teacher actions for conversations with their mentees when they discussed conversational topics and amount of time the mentor speaks. As illustrated in Figure 2.2, teacher mentors are more active when they introduce more topics and vice versa.

While mentors' input of talking during conversations is increased at the beginning of the year for new teachers, new teacher directiveness determines conversational topics. It is worthy to note that Figure 2.2 depicts teacher mentor activity and mentee directiveness as a continuum, implying that professional learning in a mentoring relationship is fluid and continuous, often allowing opportunity for transformative mentoring. Given the purpose of the present study is to

examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors, this study can hopefully improve understanding of common topical areas discussed between teacher mentors and their mentees—and how they 1) make sense of the conversations and 2) apply what they learn through the conversations in their classroom practices.

**Figure 2.2** *The Mentoring Roles in Dialogues Model*



*Note.* Adapted from Beek et al. (2019).

*Transformative Mentoring*

Transformative mentoring is advantageous for early career teachers when the opportunity is available for new teachers to talk about and see teaching practices in action (Nolan & Molla, 2018). An effective transformative mentoring strategy is role-modeling. Role-modeling provides

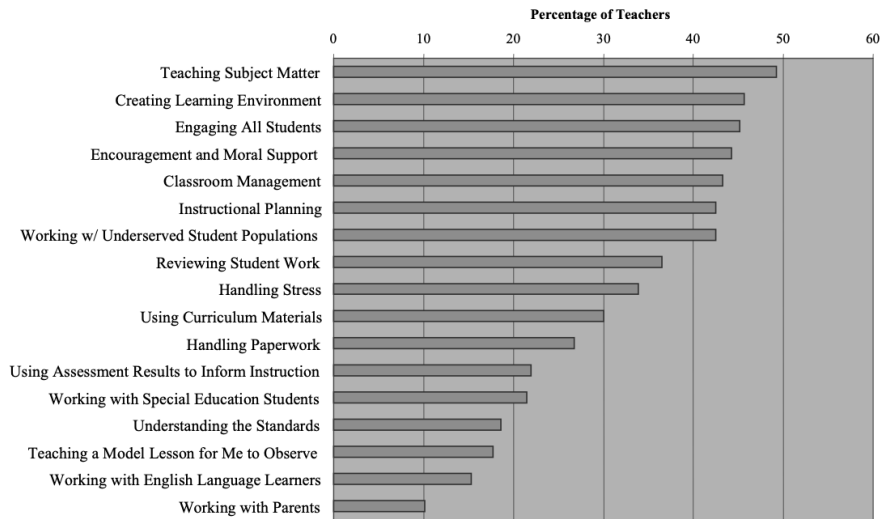
an opportunity for mentor and mentee to engage in constructivist-oriented learning (Clark & Byrnes, 2012; van Ginkel et al., 2018). Van Ginkel et al. (2018) state role-modeling to be an effective mentoring practice in allowing new teachers to reflect on instructional practices. Role-modeling has the potential to increase early career teacher enthusiasm by new teachers observing successful in-field teaching practices.

Hong and Matsko (2019) and Jones et al. (2019) found that most conversations between new teachers and their mentors occur after lesson implementation. Conversations between early career teachers and their mentors is a breeding ground for transformative mentoring. Jones et al. (2019) affirmed that 80% of conversations happen in teaching spaces, such as teacher classrooms and hallways. Genuine relationships support such conversations. As early career teachers build authentic relationships with their mentors, incidental learning or unconscious learning that occurs by accident, transpires (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Conscious topics of conversation between new teachers and their mentors consist of lesson instruction, praise, or general questioning (Jones et al., 2019). Unfortunately, Beek et al. (2019) concluded from their study that the conversation topics after lesson observations are generic, often not discussing specific behaviors or goals. This study can hopefully improve understanding of common topical areas discussed between early career teachers and their mentors.

Grossman et al. (2012) concluded from their study on new teachers' perspectives of their mentors, that most talked about topics during conversations were pedagogy, classroom learning environments, and student engagement as presented in Table 2.2. However, these topics were not the most helpful for the new teachers as reported in Table 2.3. In fact, as depicted in Table 2.4, the new teachers wanted more help on classroom management, instructional planning, and modeling, or the act of observing their mentors teach.

**Table 2.2**

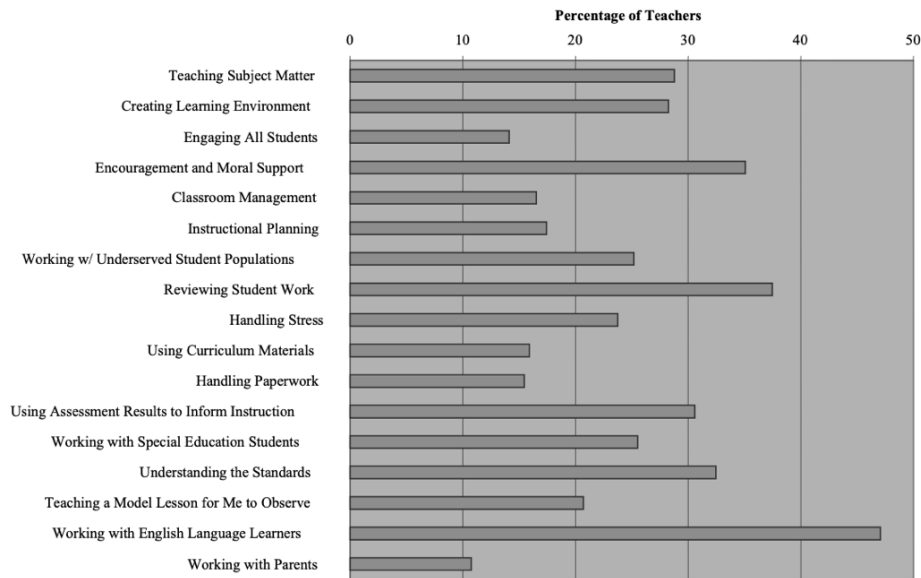
*Early Career Teachers' Perspectives of Topics Discussed During Their Mentoring Relationship*



*Note.* Adapted from Grossman et al. (2012).

**Table 2.3**

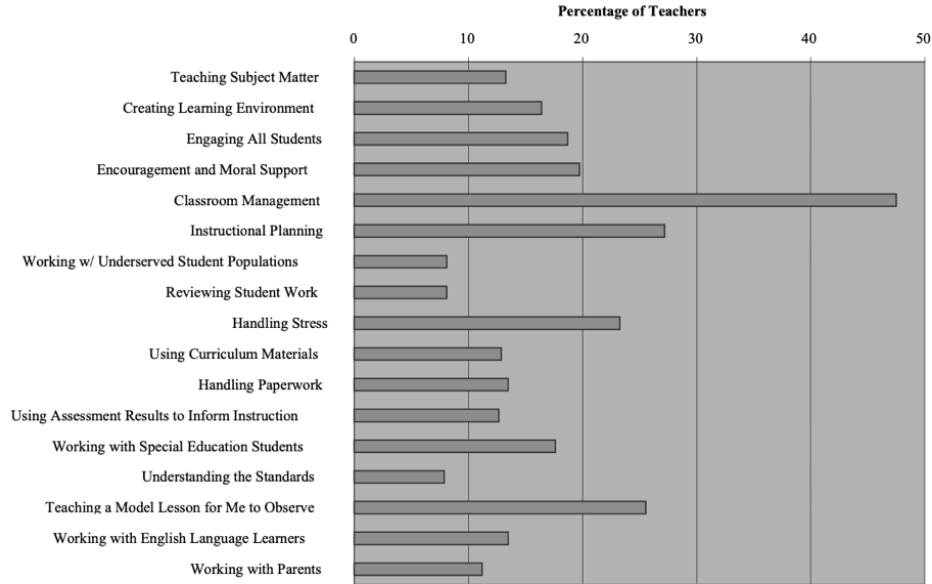
*Early Career Teachers' Perspectives of Topics That Were Helpful from Their Mentoring Relationship*



*Note.* Adapted from Grossman et al. (2012).

**Table 2.4**

*Early Career Teachers' Perspectives of Needed Topics to Be Discussed During Their Mentoring Relationship*



*Note.* Adapted from Grossman et al. (2012).

Modeling allows for mutual professional job embedded learning in a mentoring relationship as it is helpful for mentor teachers to also conduct new teacher classroom observations.

### **Professional Job Embedded Learning**

Professional job embedded learning is the cornerstone of teacher mentoring. While professional learning has traditionally been thought of as prerequisite training before employment, professional job embedded learning allows for new teachers to develop their skillset while *doing* the work of teaching (Zepeda, 2019). Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reported professional learning to be content focused, often offering opportunities for feedback and reflection. Zepeda (2019) asserted professional job embedded learning to include active listening, collaboration with colleagues, and opportunity for immediate application in classroom practice. Zepeda (2019) supported Parise and Spillane (2010) when they described professional

learning as “interactions with colleagues around teaching and learning, including conversations about instruction, peer observations, feedback, and advice-seeking about instruction” (p. 324).

Professional job embedded learning is important to teacher mentoring because new teachers, utilizing adult learning theory, learn from their personal on the job experiences and their mentor’s job-related experiences. A study conducted by Reitman and Karge (2019) revealed professional learning from a mentoring program was beneficial to new teachers as the participants of the study discussed their professional learning to include learning about curriculum, special education needs, and student poverty. All topics were taught during preservice preparation but elaborated on by veteran teacher mentors during professional job embedded learning. The practicality of these professional learning sessions supports Sikma’s (2019) belief of integrated professional learning cultures offering mentorship from a variety of experienced teachers (Shanks et al., 2020).

Professional learning that is job embedded provides new teachers with the opportunity to listen, observe, and even do the work of teaching in real time (Zepeda, 2019). The power of professional job embedded learning for new teachers is that new teachers are able to immediately communicate with their mentor about the progress of their work, as well as receive guidance from their mentor on how to critically think of problem-solving strategies to improve student achievement. Mentoring conversations is continuous professional job embedded learning (Jones et al., 2019). New teachers should feel supported by trustworthy mentors as they seek possibilities of implementing effective classroom instruction through meaningful dialogue.

Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) believe professional learning is successful within a trusting environment that offers teacher autonomy, collaboration, and implementation of meaningful activities. Activities such as engaging in debrief conversations after classroom

observations support retrospective metacognition, or the ability to reflect on past actions for the present and future (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Being intrinsically motivated from past experiences to use as a reservoir for immediate and future applications are assumptions of adult learning (Knowles, 1980).

Professional learning that is job embedded assists new teachers' transition from preservice to inservice teachers by providing teachable moments that help theoretical learning to become practical (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Sheridan & Young, 2017). Professional development is an essential aspect of teacher mentoring because it ultimately provides a safe space for relationship building and critical reflection. Isolation has historically been one of the top reasons for teacher attrition (Lortie, 1975; Shanks et al., 2020). Through collegiality, professional learning communities help new teachers feel respected and recognized, further eliminating feelings of loneliness (Shanks et al., 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018) and increasing a sense of belonging for new teachers (Zepeda, 2018). New teachers also become more comfortable from the respect of colleagues, which triggers opportunities for new teachers to share resources and engage in critical thinking with their new teacher mentor.

### **The Roles of New Teacher Mentors**

Teacher mentoring cannot be effective without the role of the teacher mentor. In fact, teacher mentors are the most valuable resource in teacher mentoring. This section of the literature review focused on teacher mentor responsibilities and mentor training.

#### *Teacher Mentor Responsibilities*

Early career teacher mentors are approachable, nonjudgmental, and efficient collaborators, who possess professional knowledge and provide resources (Ewing, 2021). Early career teacher mentors support new teachers through providing meaningful experiences that

appeal to emotion, continuance in teaching, and obligation to the profession (Hong & Matsko, 2019). Meaningful experiences like classroom observations can improve new teachers' professional identity through in-depth exchanges that impact new teachers' mindsets (Anthony et al., 2019; Hairon et al., 2020; Sheridan & Young, 2017; Zepeda et al., 2019).

A culture of professional learning within a school is built on trust among supportive colleagues like new teacher mentors. Established trust helps early career teachers take risks of authentic classroom practices that ultimately help with student achievement (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Zepeda, 2020). Trust between new teachers and their mentors help us to understand this study by making sense of how early career teachers use their mentoring conversations in their classroom practices.

New teacher mentors support the school's professional learning culture by providing trustworthy and empathic relationships to new teachers that offer opportunities to model, collaborate, and review effective teaching strategies (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Zepeda, 2020). While early career teachers learn from mentoring, teacher mentors also engage in professional development within the mentoring relationship, further contributing to the cycle of professional learning within school culture. Mutual collaboration ultimately enhances both teachers' pedagogical competencies through being solution oriented (Hairon et al., 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Sheridan & Young, 2017).

Beutel et al. (2017) conducted a case study of mentor teachers in a mentoring preparation program. Through focus group discussions and interviews, Beutel et al. (2017) found that mentor teachers benefit from their mentoring relationship in terms of their status in the school and their responsibility to their mentor. The study reported that mentors were pleased with their school

leadership for their acknowledgement to share their expertise to teacher mentees. The mentors also reported they were more committed to their job when they engaged in mentoring practices.

In addition to pedagogical demands, teacher mentors impact new teachers' social and emotional needs. Teacher mentors communicate with their early career teacher mentees concerning the school's operations, values, hierarchy of superiors, and administrator responsibilities (Anthony et al., 2019; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). Teacher mentors collaborate with school principals to provide resources for professional development sessions (Squires, 2019). Early career teacher mentors ultimately behave as a positive bridge between instructional leader and new teacher as they provide ongoing assistance to support building teacher self-efficacy and developing and refining best classroom practices.

One way in which teacher mentors can provide professional development to early career teachers is by being respectful of their mentees' past accomplishments. This recognition sends validation to new teachers that ultimately creates a more fruitful relationship (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). New teachers will feel free to offer ideas and try new pedagogical practices (Nolan & Molla, 2018). It is important that teacher mentors have an upfront discussion with early career teachers of mentee learning expectations from their relationship. This is also a good time for teacher mentors to emphasize mentee confidentiality that supports risk-taking in professional learning (Nolan & Molla, 2018). Teacher mentors are more effective in their role if they are properly trained.

### *Mentor Training*

Mentoring training has long been needed for teacher mentors to effectively interact with early career teachers. Hobson et al. (2009) claimed that mentors, who usually volunteer, have their own habits of mentoring that often are not efficient or beneficial. When mentor training is

provided to teacher mentors, mentors are better equipped to provide new teachers with the ability to build knowledge and values of the teaching profession through constructivism, reading material, and the art of reflection ((Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Reitman & Karge, 2019). Mentors are also able to provide meaningful conversations and apprenticeship opportunities to early career teachers (Ambrosetti, 2014). Waterman and He (2011) revealed that without pay for mentor teachers, teacher retention declined.

The instruction of mentor training brings awareness of adult learning for teacher mentors to use in professional learning within their mentoring relationships. Ironically, adult learning theory is embedded in mentor training through its instruction for mentors. Teacher mentors use adult learning theory when they are aware of how to encourage their mentee to engage in self-directed learning. Mentors may follow the steps presented in Knowles's (1975) account on self-directed learning. The steps are: (1) climate setting, (2) diagnosing learning needs, (3) formulating learning goals, (4) identifying human and material resources for learning, (5) choosing and implementing appropriate strategies, and (6) evaluating learning outcomes.

Teacher mentors must initially understand their mentee. van Ginkel et al. (2018) declared that mentors should engage in dimensions of social judgment by paying attention to their mentee's personal aspects, such as patience, honesty, willingness to learn, ability to take initiative, and potential positive influence in school and professional aspects. Teacher mentors should acknowledge the mentee's past experiences to understand their needs. Acknowledgement of these experiences show early career teachers that they are valuable as well as help them make appropriate goals (Pletcher et al., 2019; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018).

To help early career teachers achieve their goal, mentors provide effective strategies and resources to transform learning.

Mentor training may help teacher mentors understand how to use conversations as a strategy for new teacher professional development. Mentor training can provide conversational guidance for mentor teachers as, according to the theory of communicative action, there are open and concealed strategic communications. While open strategic communication, such as C.R.A.F.T. conversations, as described by Zepeda et al. (2019), are welcomed within mentoring conversations, concealed strategic communication can be detrimental to teacher emotional support and overall teacher retention. Concealed strategic communication occurs when objectives of a conversation are not openly expressed (Heikkinen et al., 2018). As described in Table 2.5, there are two types of concealed strategic communication: conscious deception and unconscious deception.

**Table 2.5**

*Strategic Communication*

Strategic Communication	Definition	Type	Type Description
Open Strategic Communication	“...predetermined goals of the speaker are openly expressed...” (Heikkinen et al., 2018, p. 5)		
Concealed Strategic Communication	“...objectives or ambitions [of conversation] are not expressed” (Heikkinen et al., 2018, p. 5). Types are conscious and unconscious deception.	Conscious Deception	“...manipulation of the other party where the speaker is aware of the aims of discussion but tries to mask them” (Heikkinen et al., 2018, p. 5).

Strategic Communication	Definition	Type	Type Description
		Unconscious Deception	“...the speaker is unconsciously guided by an ideological belief system of some kind, such as a political worldview (Heikkinen et al., 2018, p. 5).

Knowing the subtle differences between the two types of strategic communication can benefit mentor teachers’ mentoring practices.

Mentor training may also encourage conversations using Daloz’s Psychodevelopmental Perspective. This perspective is based on storytelling dialogue. Through sharing personal experiences with early career teachers, mentors provide a vision to their mentees (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Sheridan & Young, 2017). The vision helps early career teachers understand the ins and outs of teaching that they need to learn and the why they need to learn them, which is an assumption of adult learning presented by Knowles (1984). Sheridan and Young (2017) implied that conversations between early career teachers and their mentors that focus on pedagogy are most impactful for both teachers.

The role of new teacher mentors is important for this study because mentors provide meaningful experiences for their mentees that begin with authentic conversations. Teacher mentors offer professional knowledge and resources to early career teachers that help them take risks of classroom practices (Ewing, 2021; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Zepeda, 2020). Ambrosetti (2014) attested that mentor teachers should be positive and free spirited by laughing more often, listening, and providing encouragement. Teacher mentors who have a strong desire to help new teachers through such actions offer the best help for meeting their needs (Hairon et al., 2020; Shanks et al., 2020).

## Chapter Summary

Teacher mentoring helps decrease teacher burnout, keeping new teachers satisfied with their jobs and ultimately improving student achievement (Renbarger & Davis, 2019). In mentoring relationships, teacher mentors use adult learning to communicate with early career teachers of how to use their pedagogical competencies for effective student instruction (Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Zepeda, 2019). Mentoring conversations support critical thinking, innovation, and discovery for new teachers (Jones et al., 2019). Early career teachers begin to know their teacher mentors through dialogue that elicits teacher collaboration.

Conversations and other professional job embedded learning assists new teachers by providing teachable moments that merge theory and practicality (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Sheridan & Young, 2017). Studies have reported mentors who are supported by school principals possess the skills needed to help new teachers engage in professional learning (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020). Essentially, early career teacher mentors support new teachers through providing meaningful experiences that appeal to emotion and continuance in teaching (Hong & Matsko, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. This dissertation examines topical areas of conversations between early career teachers and their mentors and how new teachers use the conversations in their classroom practice. The qualitative methods used in this study will be presented in Chapter 3.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

High quality new teacher mentoring may be the solution to the national teacher shortage. (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). However, as the teacher shortage is growing, the lack of teacher mentors is growing as well. Nguyen et al. (2022) concluded that they estimate there are 52,800 teacher vacancies and 163,650 underqualified teachers nationwide. The United States Department of Education has been collaborating with policymakers for professional development opportunities, such as improvement of teacher mentoring, to enhance teacher retention (Roth & Harris, 2022).

Research positions that the “revolving door” of teachers decelerates with mentoring programs given that new teacher mentoring decreases teacher attrition by 12% compared to attrition in other professions (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Teachers have reported mentoring to be one of the most important aspects of a new teacher’s first year of the profession because it decreases anxiety and it accelerates learning pedagogy (Richter et al., 2013). This study was designed to explore the phenomena that occur between early career teachers and their experiences from conversations with their mentor.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. The research aims to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations. Through semi-structured interviews and field notes, the contributions of mentoring conversations from the perspectives of early career teachers were examined. Because

communication between teacher and mentor is a primary feature of mentoring programs, it is significant to understand mentoring conversations and the actions that follow for the benefit of early career teachers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?
2. What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?
3. How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?

This chapter provided a detailed description of the research methodology and procedures used in this study by including the following sections: theoretical framework, research methodology, design of the study, the research site, data collection methods, data management, data analysis, trustworthiness, reflexivity statement, ethics, assessment of benefits and risks, and limitations of the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This qualitative study was designed to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. This study was based on interpretivism as interpretivists believe individuals make understandings of context from personal experiences, similar to early career teachers understanding effective classroom practices from conversations with their mentors. These understandings are subjective realities as everyone possesses multiple perspectives of the world. The qualitative process compliments interpretivist theory as interpretivism values individual experiences through participant observation and interviews (Lather, 2006). The researcher

believed it was important to study discourse between early career teachers and their mentors, rather than measure the effects of social interactions, to gain a better understanding of teacher perspectives and experiences (Brinkmann et al., 2020; Klein & Myers, 1999; O'Brien et al., 2014).

Rooted within interpretivism, symbolic interactionism theory uses symbols to explain the interactions of individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2016). It is the meaning of symbols, such as a mentor, that people interpret their environment. Symbolic interactionism theorists believed that individuals conduct actions based on experiences and these actions ultimately detail the operations within a community (Carter & Fuller, 2016; Tracy, 2018). As new teachers symbolize their mentor as a supporting partner, it is their actions in their teaching pedagogy that will reflect experiences from their mentoring relationship. Prasad (2018) believed that negotiated orders balance symbolic interactionism as individuals possess different perspectives about their shared environment. Prasad (2018) further elaborated, “All social realities are therefore negotiated orders built on multiple realities that are tacitly adjusted and refined to make up the day-to-day reality that individuals agree upon” (p. 22). Prasad’s work on negotiated orders aligned with the approach to examining mentoring conversations and how and to what extent early career teachers constructed meaning through conversations with their mentors.

Social constructivism theorists believed knowledge was constructed through social interactions (Holmes, 2019; Lock, 2006). Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner were pioneers of constructivist theory. Vygotsky extended his beliefs upon Piaget’s cognitive constructivism as he believed that social experiences influenced learning more than cognitive structures (Ruey, 2010). Bruner believed that past experiences could help build new knowledge (Jiang & Perkins, 2013).

The researcher examined conversations between early career teachers and their mentors to understand new teacher cognitive development of teaching practices (Lutz & Huitt, 2004).

Specific aspects of mentoring conversations, such as content and roles of mentor and mentee, were analyzed as “reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation” (Firestone, 1987, p. 5). In other words, the topic of conversation and the dialogue between mentor and mentee can influence early career teacher assimilation in the teaching profession through sensemaking of the knowledge learned from communication with their mentor.

Sensemaking theory served as the theoretical framework for the present study. According to Evans (2007), sensemaking theory is a cognitive structure where individuals take in and frame information that determines their actions and behaviors. Such actions and behaviors reflect the individual’s meaning of the information. Sensemaking theory is applied to mentoring conversations as early career teachers learn from their mentors and apply their learning through classroom practices.

Sensemaking is situated within social constructivism as researchers have declared “sense” to mean interpretation and “making” to mean the experiences from situations that yield the interpretation (Coburn 2001; Evans, 2007; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Jensen et al., 2009). When knowledge is constructed from communication between early career teachers and their mentors, early career teachers must make sense of the knowledge from their conversations. An early career teacher’s interpretation of the knowledge from their mentoring conversation may be seen through classroom practices.

Weick (1995) described sensemaking as “the process by which people give meaning to experience” (p. 4). Early career teachers possess individual and social experiences from

preexisting educational knowledge and practices and from school supports (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Lin, 2000; Siskin, 1994; Spillane 2000; Spillane et al., 2002). With these experiences, the researcher realized that adult learning theory applies to new teacher mentoring as adults have experienced different past situations and learn best from the experiences of others (Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999; Ziegler & Wenfan, 2001; Zorga, 2002). Past literature recommended education leaders include adult learning in teacher professional development by advocating for early career teachers to have mentors (Desimone, 2009; Lambert, 1985; Zepeda, 2017). Teacher mentors use adult learning theories when they actively participate in meaningful conversations with early career teachers to help new teachers remain in the teacher workforce.

An assumption of adult learning is that adults learn best through immediate application (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015). New teacher mentoring offers structured time for early career teachers to meet with their mentors to engage in professional learning that as an aspiration can be applied in classroom practices. Knowledge transmission is a learning process that includes mentee receiving knowledge from a mentor. This learning process is best implemented when mentors are guiding mentees on the daily tasks of teaching. Knowledge transformation, often referred to as constructivist-oriented mentoring, is a learning process where mentor and mentee construct learning together. This learning process typically unfolds through discussion and then the implementation of instructional practices. Conversations between early career teachers and their mentors allow knowledge transmission and transformation to occur for application in classroom teaching (Richter et al., 2013). Zepeda (2020) positioned that adult learning is the foundation of teacher professional learning and further elaborated that mentoring offers a safe professional learning environment where they can actively participate by receiving feedback and support.

## Research Methodology

This research study used a qualitative design to understand conversations between early career teachers and their mentors. Early career teachers' thoughts about conversations with their mentors, the meanings that the early career teachers made of these conversations, and how the early career teachers used their mentoring conversations for their classroom practices are elements for qualitative inquiry (Freeman, 2017). Qualitative research is best applied for seeking understandings that people make from their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Qualitative research captures and describes subjective events (Quintao et al., 2020). Qualitative study, as stated by Preissle (2006), "...emphasize[es] the "how"—procedures, techniques, practices—rather than the 'what' and the 'why'" (p. 690). The researcher engaged in qualitative research by exploring how early career teachers used conversations with their mentors for their classroom practices. Tracy (2020) reported such a quest was supported by qualitative inquiry when she quoted post structural philosopher Michel Foucault by stating, "People *know* what they do; frequently they know *why* they do what they do, but what they don't know is what *what they do* does" (p. 254, emphasis in the original).

Qualitative research seeks to understand "...how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). However, qualitative research becomes ineffective when researchers engage in personal narratives that are irrelevant or lack validity. Qualitative research is a disadvantage when one seeks statistical correlations and significance without narratives from studied individuals.

Findings from qualitative research evolve from an inductive process that the researcher uses to make contextual meaning from data collected from their participants (Merriam, 2009). Through participants' shared perspectives of the investigated topic, qualitative research yields the opportunity to discover themes that produce knowledge to the field of study (Quintao et al., 2020). Through interviews and observations of individuals who are immersed in the study's setting, the researcher uses qualitative research to understand a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

### **Design of the Study**

The qualitative research method for this research was a case study. A case study uses an inquiry strategy to investigate findings within a specific timeframe (Baskarada, 2014). Quintao et al. (2020) described a case study by stating, "It serves to answer questions that the research does not have much control over the phenomenon studied" (p. 274). With such flexible variables, a case study was the most appropriate qualitative method for this study (Merriam, 2009).

Case studies are often used in education because they allow researchers to interact with participants to make sense of their past experiences in the workplace (Gibbert et al., 2008; Merriam, 2009). Through interviews and observations, case studies encourage participants to share their perspectives of the investigated circumstance (Marrelli, 2007). Creswell (2007) proclaimed case studies allowed participants to engage in storytelling as they share descriptive narratives of their experiences within a program.

### **The Research Site**

It is important to examine the research site in that it provides the context for the study. Research by Paula and Gr̄infelde (2018) has suggested mandated involvement of educational leaders in teacher induction practices at the national, state, and local education levels. This section examined the reason for selection of the research site with context of the national, state,

and school district levels. A description of the site's community, students, teachers, and functioning of the site's mentoring program was also examined in this section. Lastly, recruitment of participants and the study's sample size was examined.

#### *National Level*

It is recommended that, starting at the national level, educational leaders should focus on new teacher professional development rather than supervisory evaluation of pedagogical practices (Paula & Gr̄infelde, 2018). A focus area of United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona is to invest in strategies to retain high-quality educators. Under his direction, the U.S. Department of Education commits to providing teachers with resources, such as mentoring for early career teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Kutsyuruba et al. (2020) recommend educational leaders to fund resources such as mentor training.

#### *State Level*

The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2022) emphasized mentoring training in their Teacher and Leader Induction Support Program. Guidelines for the program include:

1. The mentors will be recruited and selected based on established mentor guidance.
2. An ongoing Mentor Training Program will be developed, which is differentiated, flexible, and research-based.
3. Mentor expectations delineate the roles and responsibilities of mentors for successful Induction Phase Teachers.
4. A quality mentoring program addresses planning, scheduling, roles and responsibilities, training, and accountability in alignment with the district induction plan.
5. Mentor accountability is addressed through multiple measures that will include self-assessments, principal surveys, Induction Phase Teacher feedback, and district level data.

The Georgia Department of Education (2022) defined the Induction Phase Teacher as, a teacher who has been hired into a new permanent position in any public school in Georgia. Teachers are considered to be in an “induction phase” until they successfully complete the district induction program. The district program will be tiered to provide differentiated support based on an individual’s needs. (p. 4)

The GaDOE Teacher and Leader Induction Support Program hosts a yearly statewide mentoring summit and serves as a comprehensive and sustainable induction model for Georgia school districts.

### *School District Level*

Great Plains School District (GPSD, a pseudonym) is a metropolitan school system in Georgia. With similar guidelines to GaDOE Teacher and Leader Induction Support Program, GPSD partners with their schools to provide a research-based, high-quality mentor program that focuses on mentor training. The goal of this system program was to increase mentor and mentee efficacy as a way to help integrate early career teachers into the culture of the school and district.

The school district’s mentoring program meets with their schools’ lead mentor teachers once per month to discuss professional learning of facilitating a local school mentoring program, topics for mentor training, and effective early career teacher mentoring practices. Lead mentor teachers are mandated to establish a new teacher induction committee at their school with members of new teacher mentors, administrators, behavioral specialists, instructional coaches, and departmental chairpersons. Lead mentor teachers are to meet with their induction committee periodically throughout the academic year. Lead mentor teachers are to report their school’s new teacher retention rate to the school district. To help retain new teachers, the research site closely follows the model of the district’s mentoring program.

### *Site Description*

Cedarsville Middle School (CMS, a pseudonym) is a suburban public school within Great Plains School District (GPSD, a pseudonym). CMS is one of the largest middle schools in the district. Many of the school district's educational leaders were teachers or administrators at CMS before advancing to other leadership roles. In 2018-2019, CMS was appointed a new school principal, who implemented many changes in the school culture.

The school culture of CMS is collaborative among staff for improved student learning. According to results from the school's Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES), a survey created to promote and inform conversations for improvement within an organization (The Center for Educational Effectiveness, 2023), CMS staff are welcome to new ideas and willing to be held accountable for student learning. From 2022, staff at CMS perceived Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment to have improved by two percent. Additionally, staff believed that their professional development was more focused with three percent improvement from 2022.

While staff at CMS are open and honest with colleagues to share resources for student achievement, their perception of organizational trust decreased in 2023. CMS staff did not believe they worked in a supportive environment as their perception of being able to address conflict within the school decreased by 10% from 2022. Comparingly, the belief of CMS staff that their school principal cares about them as a person declined by 11%, similar to their belief of the decrease in parent and community involvement.

### *Community*

To increase involvement of Cedarsville Middle School's parents and the community, CMS hosts parent academic and spirit nights. Parent academic nights are designed to inform parents of student learning that occurs in the classrooms. The series of professional learning

sessions for parents are written in the local school improvement plan as Parent University, an initiative to promote parent collaboration for student achievement. CMS also host spirit nights at various community locations throughout the academic year. Spirit nights are designed to encourage socialization among students, teachers, parents, and the community. While the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is active at CMS, there has steadily been a yearly decline in participation of parents and teachers.

*Students*

With approximately 1900 students at CMS, over 50% are minority students with about 25% of them being English Language Learners. 15.3% of students at CMS are economically disadvantaged and 17.4% are with disabilities. According to the Educational Effectiveness Survey, while students have a sense of belonging at Cedarsville Middle School, they do not always feel happy to come to school (The Center for Educational Effectiveness, 2023). Great Plains School District’s academic data revealed that students outperformed the state average scores for the Georgia Milestones Assessments, the state’s standardized test system, for all core content areas except Grade 8 High School Physical Science. Table 3.1 provides demographic information of CMS students.

**Table 3.1**

*Cedarsville Middle School Student Demographics*

Asian %	Black %	Hispanic%	Other %	White %
10.6%	33.1%	33.6%	6.1%	16.6%

*Teachers*

After the global COVID-19 pandemic, teacher turnover at CMS has increased significantly. From the 2022-2023 school year to the 2023-2024 school year, the number of new

teachers have grown by 20%. According to the school's Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES) for 2022-2023 school year, almost 50% of teachers at CMS had less than 1 to 3 years of experience teaching at the school. In a school of approximately 134 teachers, data trends have shown about thirty new teachers will continue to be a need for hire each year. Teacher turnover has particularly been prevalent in the Special Education and Mathematics Departments.

Fifty percent of the overall new teacher hires from past years have been special education and mathematics teachers. Early career teachers often find themselves sharing teacher mentors as veteran teacher attrition continues to disseminate throughout CMS.

#### *Description of Site's Mentoring Program*

Cedarsville Middle School invites early career teachers to participate in a mentoring program. The mentoring program solicits teacher mentors during the summer before the academic year begins. Early career teachers are mandated to attend the school's new teacher orientation where they engage in a meet and greet with new teacher mentors. During the mentoring meet and greet, teacher mentors and mentees are encouraged to become acquainted and socialize with participants in the mentoring program. Formal mentor assignments are not released by school administration until later in the school year. New teacher mentors and mentees also socialize in gatherings scheduled in December and May of the academic year.

During September, the principal formally assigns early career teachers with mentors. The principal releases formal mentoring assignments in September as she likes to establish a professional learning community during the first month of school among all teachers in the school building. This professional learning community is designed to offer new teachers the opportunity to receive mentoring from any teacher in the building rather than new teachers having to communicate with one specific teacher peer. Early career teachers are eventually

assigned a content mentor and staff mentor. The content mentor is the new teachers' curriculum lead teacher, and the staff mentor is an experienced teacher, observed by the school's administration, who bonded or was perceived to bond well with the new teacher.

After formal mentoring assignments are released, new teacher mentors are to mentor their mentees at least one time per week. This one time per week mentoring is officially deemed as Check-In Wednesdays. Along with the mentoring program facilitator, all mentors conduct quick checks with their mentees on Wednesdays. New teacher mentors are to document at least three mentoring conversations per semester. Documentation templates are modified from the school's districts mentoring program. Unfortunately, majority of the mentor teachers did not submit documentation at the time of this study.

For the 2023-2024 academic year, 31 new teachers were enrolled in the program, with 11 teachers being early career teachers with 1 to 3 years of teaching experience. New teacher mentors and mentees attended monthly new teacher meetings where professional learning from feedback of a needs-based assessment was shared with new teachers. At the end of the academic year, it is expected that new teachers will advance in the mentoring program from the cohort of first year teachers at CMS to second year teachers at CMS. Cedarsville Middle School's new teacher mentoring program is working to be a three-year program for all new teachers, with this year's new teachers being its inaugural cohort.

### *Recruitment and Sample Size*

The case study recruited participants based on purposeful sampling procedures (Ishak et al., 2014). Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to recruit participants who had experience in the mentoring program (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling ensures credibility by selection of

participants with association with teacher mentoring and a myriad of perspectives about its definition and effects (Marrelli, 2007).

The researcher employed criterion sampling, situated within purposeful sampling, for this case study. Criterion sampling list characteristics essential for sample participants to possess.

Each participant met the following criterion:

1. An early career teacher with one to three years of teaching experience in the profession
2. Participant of the research site's teacher mentoring program
3. Having identified a formal or informal teacher mentor who they converse with about workplace experiences at least twice a week
4. Being willing to openly discuss conversation topics within their mentoring relationship and the actions that occurred after mentoring conversations

Merriam (2009) indicated availability, time, and willingness to participate in the study as aspects of participant selection. In the context of this study, early career teachers were defined as new teachers with one to three years of teaching experience within the profession. There were 11 early career teachers eligible for this research study; however, only 5 participants provided consent to participate. Conversation between early career teachers and their new teacher mentors is not the same between any two teachers; therefore, interviewing and observing classroom practice implementation from different mentoring relationships is expected to provide more robust data (Creswell, 2007). In the following section, interviews and field notes were explored and discussed as data collection methods within the study.

### **Data Collection Methods**

This qualitative research used the case study approach. Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of data collection coupled with field notes of early career teachers' classroom

practices to understand conversations between early career teachers and their mentors. Each data source is summarized in Table 3.2.

**Table 3.2**

*Data Sources*

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Description</b>
Interviews	Interviews were conducted with early career teachers.
Field Notes	Detailed descriptions and subjective interpretations of interview processes and classroom observations from the researcher. A reflective diary was also used by the researcher.

*Interviews*

The main source that was used to generate data for this study were semi-structured interviews. Springer (2014) advocated for collecting data using interviews as such:

Interviews provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms. It is a reflective process that enables the interviewee to explore his or her experience in detail and to reveal many feathers of that experience that have an effect on the issue investigated. (p. 106)

Interviews were chosen as a primary data collection method because interviews offer an opportunity for participants to reveal their unique descriptions and meanings of a particular topic from their own perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews were conducted with all early career teachers with a focus on understanding conversations between themselves and their mentors. Early career teachers were interviewed using protocols addressing thoughts on conversations within their mentoring relationship and topical areas of conversation discussed with their mentoring partner.

The researcher used in-depth, open-ended, and semi-structured interview questions to facilitate the data collection process. Tracy (2020) concluded, “The advantages of semi-structured interviews are they allow for more emic, emergent understandings to blossom...” (p. 158). Semi-structured interviews are a conversational strategy that allows the interviewer to seek topics of interest in greater depth through questions beyond the interview guide (Creswell, 2007). Tracy (2020) elaborated, “...[An] interview guide is meant to stimulate discussion rather than dictate it” (p. 158). The interview guide for this research study was a protocol that allowed for a combination of structured or less structured interview questions in no specific order (Merriam, 2009). The interview guide was developed based on existing literature of early career teachers, teacher mentors, mentoring conversations, adult learning theory, and job embedded professional learning.

The early career teachers’ interview guide specifically focused on their perspectives about mentoring conversations and topical areas discussed during mentoring conversations (Appendix A). Table 3.3 presents a sample of interview questions used with the new teachers.

**Table 3.3**

*Sample of Interview Questions*

Interview Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What makes an effective mentor?</li> <li>• What do you like about your mentor?</li> <li>• What are the topics that you discuss with your mentor?</li> <li>• How have these topics been useful in your classroom practices?</li> <li>• What do you think about the conversations with your mentor?</li> <li>• Describe the role of conversations in your mentoring relationship.</li> <li>• What have been your best experiences with your mentor?</li> <li>• What have been your worst experiences with your mentor?</li> </ul>

Interviews were scheduled at a time where the teacher was available. Prior to conducting the interview, the researcher communicated with all participants the purpose of the interview,

information about the consent form requirement (Appendix B), and to provide notification that the interview would be recorded. Interviews started with introductory questions. Introductory questions allowed the interviewee to feel comfortable during the interview and to have confidence in their answers to the questions. Tracy (2020) confirmed, “For potential interviewees to want to talk with you, it’s important to frame the interview in a way that makes sense to participants...” (p. 116).

Interviews were recorded using a voice memo application on a cell phone. All recordings were transcribed by *Otter.ai* speech to text algorithm transcription software. After each teacher interview, interview transcriptions were electronically sent to each participant for review and verification of accuracy.

*Field Notes*

Another source that was used to generate data for this study were field notes. Field notes record events throughout the case study from the researcher’s perspectives and reflective thoughts (Phillippi & Lauderdal, 2018). Field notes may be short and descriptive and include details of knowledge transformation by the researcher concerning the investigated phenomenon. The researcher may document visual information not explicitly stated in discussion with the study’s participants. This information may depict important data that influences the research findings (Tessier, 2012). Table 3.4 presents a sample of fieldnotes collected during an early career teacher participant’s classroom observation.

**Table 3.4**

*Sample of Classroom Observation Fieldnotes*

Teacher Actions	Student Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct Instruction using presentation slides</li> <li>• Teacher is knowledgeable of content</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talkative</li> <li>• Some students responded to teacher’s questions</li> </ul>

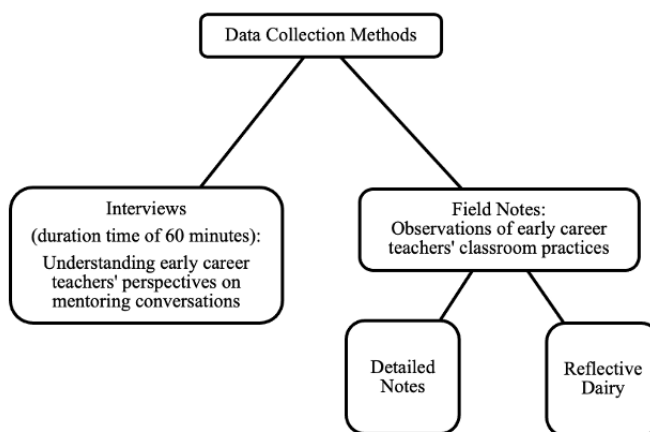
Teacher Actions	Student Actions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An instructional strategy used was a graphic organizer presented on Google Classroom as an assignment</li> <li>• Teacher used Bloom’s Taxonomy of Compare/Contrast within assignment</li> <li>• I can see where this new teacher needs help with instructional strategies</li> </ul>	

One type of field notes involved detailed notes from observations of early career teachers’ classroom practices. This note-taking strategy occurred in real time where the researcher was able to capture participants’ actions and data supporting the data from interview transcription (Tessier, 2012). The researcher organized these field notes in a journal.

Another type of field notes used for this case study was a reflective diary. The researcher recorded personal reactions, thoughts, and conclusions based on their subjectivity in this dairy (Sanjek, 1990). This note-taking strategy allowed the researcher to recall events and write down my own perspectives of occurred incidents. The researcher’s mistakes, confusion, changes in thoughts, and successes were also chronicled (Wolfinger, 2002). Figure 3.1 summarized the interview data collection process.

**Figure 3.1**

*Data Collection Methods*



## **Data Management**

The study's data remained confidential with the researcher being the only individual with access to the data. Field notes were locked in a file cabinet and electronic data was stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and within an online repository (Antonio et al., 2020; Paulus & Lester, 2016). The study's participants were informed of confidentiality and anonymity. Therefore, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of participants. All data will be destroyed within three years after the completion of the study.

## **Data Analysis**

The case study's data were analyzed through reviewing interview transcripts and the researcher's fieldnotes and classroom observation notes. Merriam (2009) stated:

Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data and making sense out of the data involves consolidating, residing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning. (p. 175)

Data analysis was completed throughout the study during and after data collection. Simultaneous data collection and analysis promoted rigor and coherence of the experiences from the study's participants (Merriam, 2009).

Freeman (2017) described her thoughts about the data analysis process by stating, “strategy, to me, best describes analysis because it suggests a dynamic decision-making process in-the-midst of the particularities of a data set, situation, aims and desires” (p. 1). The data analysis process for the present research study included organizing the data, coding the data, generating themes, and presenting the results. Data of early career teachers were reviewed and afterwards, examined holistically.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis was used as a part of this study’s data analysis. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns [themes] within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis allows for the researcher to capture common topics and concepts deemed important for the investigated phenomenon (Bryman & Burgess, 1994). From interview transcriptions, codes were created by the researcher from repeated ideas in the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). Table 3.5 illustrates sample codes from early career teachers’ interviews.

**Table 3.5**

*Sample Codes from Early Career Teachers’ Interview Transcripts*

Sample Codes from Early Career Teachers’ Interview Transcripts	
• Supportive	• Written Feedback
• Modeling	• Phone Calls
• Availability	• Interactive
• Verbal Feedback	• Observation
• Informant	• Student Behaviors
• Weekends	• Friendly

Codes were also developed from deductive and inductive reasoning (Bendassolli, 2013). The researcher used deductive reasoning when creating codes applicable to the study’s research questions. Inductive reasoning was employed by the researcher for creating codes from frequent ideas presented in the data. Inductive reasoning starts with definite facts and moves to general notions, while deductive reasoning moves from the general notions to the definite facts (Constantinou et al., 2017). Table 3.6 provides excerpts of coded data from early career teacher interviews using deductive and inductive reasoning.

**Table 3.6***Sample of Early Career Teachers' Interview Transcripts Excerpts and Coding*

Excerpts	Coding
The caring. I mean, she checks in on me almost every day. So, either pop in or send a message, you doing good? You, okay?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friendly</li> <li>• Supportive</li> </ul>
Yeah, it was part of the conversation. It was it was the conversation was, this is what this is. What it looks like? Here, go look at this video. Let's watch this video together, and then kind of go back and dissect the video. What did you notice? What did you see? Do you have any questions? What do you think about this?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation</li> <li>• Modeling</li> <li>• Verbal Feedback</li> </ul>
I call them [teacher mentor] every morning and ask do we have a meeting...Do I need to get to work at 8:00am or 8:30am? So, I think he's very vital in what time I need to get to work and stuff, like just anything. And it's never like, "Hey! Stop calling me!" You know, "Hey! Can you not contact me." You know. So, I think that's been very vital too.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informant</li> <li>• Availability</li> <li>• Phone Calls</li> </ul>

Codes created from data, were sorted into generalized categories that were then developed into themes (Charmaz, 2006) as presented in Table 3.7.

**Table 3.7***Codes, Categories, and Themes*

Codes	Categories	Themes
Availability Phone Calls	Communication Characteristic of a Teacher Mentor	Theme 1: Relationship Building is the Foundation of Mentoring Conversations
Friendly Supportive	Teacher Mentor Personality Traits	
Informant Verbal Feedback	Purpose of the Mentoring Relationship	Theme 2: Mentoring Conversations Provide Clarity that Enhances Understanding

Codes	Categories	Themes
Student Behaviors	Topics of Mentoring Conversations	Theme 3: Topics of Mentoring Conversations Influence Teacher Efficacy
Observation Modeling	Role of Conversations and Observations During Early Career Teacher Mentoring	Theme 4: Active Listening During Mentoring Conversations Encourages Implementation of Classroom Practices

### *Constant Comparative Method*

Constant comparative method was also used for data analysis of this study. The constant comparative method is the process of comparing coded data (Glaser, 1965; Kolb, 2012). The line-by-line coding technique was used to assist with comparing data. Line-by-line coding allows for researchers to annotate, identify, chunk, and generate themes of recurrent concepts (Freeman, 2017). As supported by Charmaz (2006), the following actions were completed by the researcher during the line-by-line coding process: (1) chunk data into smaller text phrases, (2) explain the actions of the chunked data, (3) seek reasons for and analyze meanings of the text phrases, (4) identify the importance of the acknowledged data, (5) compare data, and (6) highlight gaps in the research.

To enhance accuracy of the constant comparative method, the researcher used memo-writing to reflect and make meaning of data (Merriam, 2009) because “it is through memoing that the researcher is able to articulate, explore, contemplate and challenge their interpretations when examining data” (Birks et al., 2008, p. 71). The researcher wrote memos concerning self-reflection of interviews, participants, code choices, and themes (Saldaña, 2016). Memoing is a bridge between data collection and data analysis as the critical reflection in memos helps

researchers find codes for themes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016). Memos for this study included interview processes, participant anecdotal notes, categorization, comparing data for themes, and events (see Table 3.8).

**Table 3.8**

*Sample of Researcher’s Memos*

Memos	Purpose
<p>In comparison to my last interview, I have learned that getting to know background information about participants helps to understand their answers to questions. For instance, I am realizing a pattern of responses from teacher certified and non-certified participants.</p>	<p>Interview Process</p>
<p>This participant really wants to do well as a teacher. I notice that he is very meticulous about his job in attending meetings on time, planning lessons based on reflections of previous lessons, and being open to ideas. My noticings are identical for another participant who also wants to do well as a teacher; however, this teacher has student teaching experience. Is this why this participant seems anxious, yet comfortable in their role? Whereas the first participant seems anxious and somewhat uncomfortable in his role.</p>	<p>Participant Anecdotal Notes</p>
<p>All participants discuss having a good relationship with their teacher mentor. They provide characteristics of their mentors (e.g., friendly, supportive, interactive), which are codes from interview transcripts. They also mention receiving confirmation from their mentor of good efforts (e.g., modeling, verbal feedback, being an informant of school norms, etc.) and validation of proficient ideas (e.g., observations, verbal feedback). I think I will summarize the codes into headings for categories.</p>	<p>Categorization</p>
<p>In comparing my data, it has been a challenge in thinking of the wording for themes. All participants talk about their teacher mentor personality traits and their mentoring relationship. This information relates to the literature of relationship building. There is a lot of information about conversations and observations in each transcript. Perhaps, relationship building is a theme for the study’s purpose and research questions. More thought is needed for a theme surrounding conversations and observations.</p>	<p>Comparing Data for Themes</p>

Memos	Purpose
I can see how this participant’s classroom observation relates to their interview. I remember the participant discussing content specific topics that she discussed with her mentor. During this observation, I can clearly see proficient content knowledge and delivery (e.g., vocabulary, graphic organizers, instructional strategies).	Events

### **Trustworthiness**

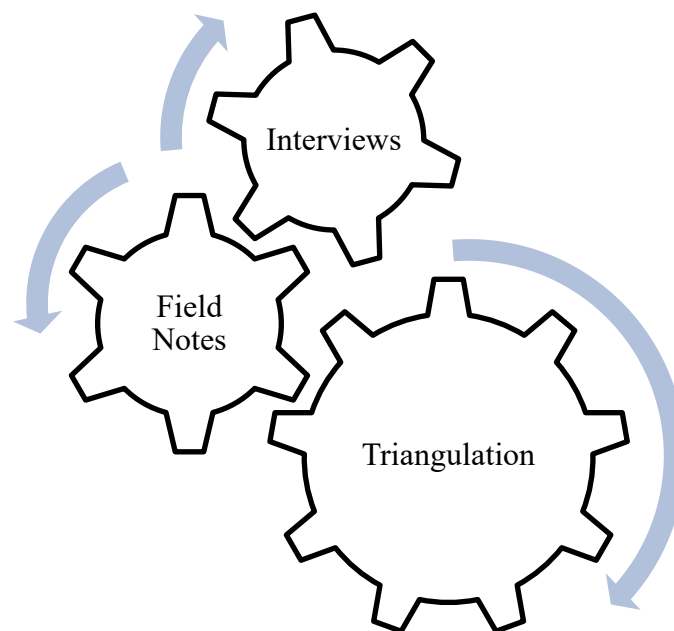
Qualitative research is often criticized and questioned. Patton (2015) stated, “for better or worse, the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of the person who collects and analyzes the data and his or her demonstrated competence” (p. 706). This case study used appropriate procedures with data sources to support the four criteria that reflects a trustworthy study: 1) credibility; 2) transferability; 3) dependability; 4) confirmability (Gibbert et al., 2008; Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) promoted internal validity, reliability, and external validity to aid in verification of findings from the researcher’s data.

Credibility becomes evident when the research findings connect to reality across perspectives with similar experiences of a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). Associated with credibility, Creswell (2007) stated, “in internal validity, the key issue is to ensure the researchers can construct a plausible causal argument that is rigorous enough to support the research results” (p. 278). To ensure the accuracy of information, triangulation and “member checking” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259) was implemented in the research study. Triangulation is a strategy that uses all methods of data collection to conclude credible findings (see Figure 3.2). Bowen (2009) described triangulation as “less a case of checking a ‘fact’ collected by one method, using another method, than using one method and then justifying the results by means of another” (p. 70). Field notes were triangulated with interviews to cross-check information for

similarity. To satisfy member-checking within this case study, participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the researcher's interpretations of their response and actions to ensure their beliefs and intentions were properly represented (Merriam, 2009). All participants acknowledged interpretations accurately represented their views and feelings.

**Figure 3.2**

*The Triangulation Process*



Transferability of a study is represented when the findings of the research study may apply or transfer outside the boundaries of the study. While some influences of the study's findings, such as sample size and purposeful sampling, are not generalized, the findings may transfer to schools with similar characteristics as described in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is essential that the researcher describes the research site and participants thoroughly to allow readers to decide if the information is transferable (Creswell, 2006; Merriam, 2009). Through earned trust with each participant, the researcher was able to collect relevant background information of participants. Transferability supports validity by ensuring the study is dependable

for other researchers to build on and improve its findings for the investigated phenomenon (Hayashi et al., 2019).

A research study's confirmability is clear when the researcher can demonstrate how the study's findings originated from neutral, objective, and unbiased lenses (Chowdhury, 2015; Cope, 2014). Korstjens and Moser (2018) describe confirmability as "the degree to which the findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers. Confirmability is concerned with establishing that...interpretations of the findings are not figments of the [researcher's] imagination" (p. 121). Researchers supports confirmability when they detail every process and decision of their case study (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2004). For instance, during interviews, the researcher asked clarifying questions in response to participants' answers to ensure information was documented correctly.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

To accurately represent participants' views on mentoring conversations, I must address my own subjectivity within this study. I identify as an American lower-middle class southern Black female. I was raised in a small rural town in middle Georgia that valued a sense of community. A member of a nuclear family with three siblings, my parents instilled in me and my sisters the values of faith, family, respect, education, and hard work.

During adolescence, I attended a small predominantly White school system where teachers lived in the community and taught generations of children from the same family. Throughout my formal education, I was always the minority in advanced classes. My parents, with only my father having some vocational training after high school, demanded I earn a decent education from all my teachers as they were determined I would attend college.

As a first-generation college student, I attend a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) in South Carolina. As a Mathematics major, I learned post-secondary math and more specifically I learned about my own Black culture. I transferred from this college to earn an undergraduate degree in Middle Level Education from a university in Atlanta, Georgia.

My family background and past educational experiences foster high expectations of excellence in teaching pedagogy, for which I believe teacher mentoring can cultivate in early career teachers. When I was an early career teacher, I possessed a strong desire to be an effective educator. It was my seventh-grade math teacher who embodied characteristics of a competent teacher. Her pedagogy was passionate and sincere that made learning have meaning. She cared that all her students learned in a safe, positive environment. She openly welcomed diversity in her classroom to make all her students feel welcomed and empowered to learn. She brought about a different approach to instruction through her creative teaching style. All students learned at their own pace in her classroom.

Similar to my seventh-grade teacher, I wanted to be the teacher that helped prepare minority students, like my younger self, for college, an endeavor that no one in my family had experienced. I knew this would take passion, attention to detail, and perseverance that could only be supported through mentoring from an effective colleague. During my teacher preparation program, I realized to produce teachers of such caliber, one had to be shown aspects of effective teaching from other teachers.

My teacher preparation provided me with valuable experiences for teaching. I witnessed firsthand through my preservice teaching in a predominately Black urban school district that although education in the United States has advanced, inequities based on a child's status (i.e., socioeconomic, color, type of disability, gender, etc.) continue to be prevalent. The school where

I student taught was underfunded and lacked parental involvement and community support. Despite these inequities, my preservice mentor teachers taught me how to welcome diversity in the classroom to provide all students with an equitable education.

My first in-service teaching position was in metro Atlanta. I taught mathematics to suburban children in gifted cluster classes. Additionally, I experienced teaching children receiving special education, who were mainly in the general population as well. Rather than my school's principal assigning me a mentor during my first year of teaching, I had to seek an experienced teacher that I thought had the potential to help me begin a successful teaching career. This experience was disheartening and stressful as I relied on many informal teacher mentors for guidance throughout my first year of teaching. I was fortunate to find competent teacher mentors that provided me social, emotional, and pedagogical support. Too many times, however, I have seen this happen to other early career teachers who unfortunately do not have mentoring support and leave the teaching profession within their first five years of teaching.

To combat this repetitive occurrence, as mathematics department chairperson and mathematics grade level curriculum lead teacher, I mentored and led new teachers as they assimilated into the school's mathematics professional learning community. During my experiences as math teacher leader, I realized that there was a higher chance to help retain all new teachers, regardless of instructional area, through mentoring of daily professional tasks rather than through only academic coaching.

With this realization, I enrolled in my school district's mentoring program for school-based lead mentor teacher. This enrollment sparked my desire to want to learn more about new teacher mentoring and work hard to be that effective mentor that could pay it forward to other early career teachers through my own mentoring relationships and relationships with other new

teacher mentors. In the role of lead mentor teacher and facilitator of the mentoring program at the research site, I assist in assigning mentor teachers to new teachers. I also promote suggested areas of discussion during mentoring conversations through professional development sessions with mentor teachers. In this position, I do not have any control on topical areas of dialogue between mentor teachers and their early career teacher mentee.

My involvement in teaching provides me with a clearer understanding of what teachers experience as they transition from preservice to in-service teaching. Being a product of a predominantly White rural school system, attending a HBCU, student teaching in a predominately Black urban school district, and being a new teacher in the suburbs has helped me to realize that teachers who teach in different demographics that may or may not reflect their background need a mentor to coach them during their first years of teaching. More specifically, new teacher mentors are needed to show early career teachers how to use the Personal Interpretive Framework (März & Kelchtermans, 2020) in becoming an effective teacher.

Throughout my career as a teacher, I have experienced and witnessed situations where teacher mentoring could have altered the outcomes in a positive manner. I am passionate about this study because research shows that mentoring helps to retain new teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Now that I am a veteran teacher who is a mentor to new teachers, this study is important to me because it is a start to focusing light on the core of new teacher mentoring, which is mentoring conversations. With such illumination, it is my hope that educational leaders and policymakers can begin to brainstorm strategies to enhance mentoring for all new teachers so to retain effective teachers in the teaching profession. With my past experiences, teacher training, and position within the mentoring program, I believe participants will be transparent with me in

communicating their thoughts about how their mentor is helping them during their beginning years of teaching.

### **Ethics**

To maintain ethical consideration for this study, the researcher ensured all data remained confidential, pseudonyms were used for participants and the research site, and informed consent was secured by all contributors to the research study. All data collected was stored on the researcher's password-protected computer and within an online archive. Hard copy of notes from interviews and observations was locked in a file cabinet. The study's participants were informed of confidentiality and anonymity.

This study was submitted and approved by both the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (Appendix C) and the research site's school principal. Participants signed an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the study and the research protocol. The participants were assured that their participation in the study was voluntary, and it was acceptable to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher's belief in professional and academic integrity yields acknowledgment of being a teacher and lead mentor teacher and facilitator of the mentoring program at the research site (Merriam, 2009).

### **Assessment of Benefits and Risks**

The benefits of this research are for study participants and educational leaders and policymakers. These stakeholders and educational allies may benefit from this study by becoming aware of the importance of teacher mentoring as it relates to teacher retention. Early career teachers gain job embedded professional learning experiences that influence their teacher effectiveness and contribute to their teaching longevity. New teacher mentors are able to reflect on mentoring experiences that aim to improve teacher competence and decrease teacher attrition.

A benefit of this case study for educational leaders and policymakers is to provide a starting point for seeking perspectives of early career teachers on teaching mentoring and developing strategies to enhance teacher mentoring programs to improve teacher retention as the aim of this study was to understand the meaning that early career teachers made of conversations with their teacher mentor. An ultimate benefit of this research study is that early career teachers may pay it forward to other new teachers by becoming teacher mentors, further perpetuating a cycle of effective teacher mentoring that diminishes teacher shortages.

There are no identifiable potential risks for this research study. There is potential difficulty for participants of this study in that interview questions and observations may intimidate teachers. Participants are told they may skip any question that makes them feel uncomfortable during interviews and may discontinue participation in the study at any time. To minimize psychological and social discomfort, participants were assured confidentiality of their participation in the study and all identifiable context factors are referred to by using pseudonyms. Data collected from the participants was only made available to the researcher.

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of this study was that participants were selected from one school in a school district in Georgia. The chosen school and school district may be a limitation because of established cultures and customs within the research site. The setting of one school limited the number of studied mentoring relationships. Within the context of this study, an early career teacher was defined as a new teacher with one to three years of teaching experience within the teaching profession. The sample size may not reflect the diversity of perspectives on teacher mentor actions, specifically conversations with early career teachers. Therefore, the findings of this study may not be generalized to other teacher populations across Georgia and beyond.

Transferability of findings to other teacher mentoring programs may be evident given common teaching practices and expectations.

Participants were selected from one school with the intentions that sacred social interactions among participants would influence their close attention to teacher mentoring to assist in their decision to remain in the teaching profession and ultimately help them pass along their successes to future early career teachers. Additionally, although the interviews followed the same protocol with each participant, it was a limitation that the attitudes and confidence levels of the participants could have impacted their responses to questions.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented the research methodology and procedures used in this study. The theoretical framework of this qualitative case study was sensemaking theory as its application to mentoring conversations allowed early career teachers to apply their learning through classroom practices. In a suburban middle school of a large metropolitan school system located east of a major southern city, interviews and observation field notes were the data collection methods of this study. Interviews were the primary source of this study as interviews allowed for early career teachers to discuss their perspectives of mentoring and how their mentoring conversations influenced their classroom practices. Observation field notes captured classroom practices that were discussed in the participants' interviews. Thematic analysis and constant comparative method provided the researcher with key research findings. Data management, trustworthiness, reflexivity statement, ethics, assessment of benefits and risks, and limitations of the study were also reviewed in this chapter. Chapter 4 presents the contextual overview of the research site, the description of the participants, and the major findings related to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

Early career teachers emerge from different backgrounds. While some new teachers are immediate graduates of traditional teacher preparation programs, many new teachers are now seeking alternative teacher certification. Although a quick attempt to fix the problem of teacher shortages, there remains the unsolved solution of increasing effective teacher mentor vacancies (Aragon, 2016). To help educational leaders and policymakers gain strategies on how to improve mentoring conversations, five early career teacher participants were selected for this study. Knowing the participants' personal and professional backgrounds helped support the purpose of this study and its research questions.

Research positions that the “revolving door” of teachers decelerates with mentoring programs given that this type of support decreases teacher attrition by 12% compared to attrition in other professions (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Teachers have reported mentoring to be one of the most important aspects of their first year in the profession because it decreases anxiety and it accelerates learning pedagogy (Richter et al., 2013). This study was designed to explore the phenomena that occur between early career teachers and their experiences from conversations with their mentor.

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. The research aims to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations. Through semi-structured interviews and observation fieldnotes, the contributions of mentoring conversations from the perspectives of early career teachers were examined. Because

communication between teacher and mentor is a primary feature of mentoring programs, it is significant to understand mentoring conversations and the actions that follow for the benefit of early career teachers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?
2. What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?
3. How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?

Chapter 4 includes contextual overview of the research site including its demographics, the participants of the study, and the findings.

### **Research Site**

The research site of this study is a middle school within Great Plains School District (GPSD, a pseudonym). GPSD is a metropolitan school system in Georgia. With similar guidelines to the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) Teacher and Leader Induction Support Program, GPSD partners with their schools to provide a research-based, high-quality mentor program that focuses on mentor training. The goal of this system program was to increase mentor and mentee efficacy as a way to help integrate early career teachers into the culture of the school and district.

The school district's mentoring program meets monthly with their schools' lead mentor teachers to discuss professional learning of facilitating a local school mentoring program, topics for mentor training, and effective early career teacher mentoring practices. Lead mentor teachers are mandated to establish a new teacher induction committee at their school with members of

new teacher mentors, administrators, behavioral specialists, instructional coaches, and departmental chairpersons. Lead mentor teachers are to meet with their induction committee periodically throughout the academic year. Lead mentor teachers are to report their school’s new teacher retention rate to the school district. Schools within GPSD can chose not to participate in the district’s mentoring program. To help retain new teachers, the research site participates in the district’s mentoring program and closely follows its model.

The research site is Cedarsville Middle School (CMS, a pseudonym), a suburban public school within Great Plains School District (GPSD, a pseudonym). CMS is one of the largest middle schools in the district. With approximately 1900 students at Cedarsville Middle School (CMS, a pseudonym), over 50% are minority students with about 25% of them being English Language Learners. 15.3% of students at CMS are economically disadvantaged and 17.4% are with disabilities. Table 4.1 provides demographic information of CMS students.

**Table 4.1**

*Cedarsville Middle School Student Demographics*

Asian %	Black %	Hispanic%	Other %	White %
10.6%	33.1%	33.6%	6.1%	16.6%

In 2018-2019, CMS was appointed a new school principal, who implemented many changes in the school culture.

The school culture of CMS is collaborative among staff for improved student learning. According to results from the school’s Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES), a survey created to promote and inform conversations for improvement within an organization (The Center for Educational Effectiveness, 2023), CMS staff are welcome to new ideas and willing to be held accountable for student learning. From 2022, staff at CMS perceived Curriculum, Instruction,

and Assessment to have improved by two percent. Additionally, staff believed that their professional development was more focused with three percent improvement from 2022.

While staff at CMS are open and honest with colleagues to share resources for student achievement, their perception of organizational trust decreased in 2023. CMS staff did not believe they worked in a supportive environment as their perception of being able to address conflict within the school decreased by 10% from 2022. Comparingly, the belief of CMS staff that their school principal cares about them as a person declined by 11%, similar to their belief of the decrease in parent and community involvement.

After the global COVID-19 pandemic, teacher turnover at CMS has increased significantly. From the 2022-2023 school year to the 2023-2024 school year, the number of new teachers have grown by 20%. According to the school's Educational Effectiveness Survey (EES) for 2022-2023 school year, almost 50% of teachers at CMS had less than 1 to 3 years of experience teaching at the school. In a school of approximately 134 teachers, data trends have shown about thirty new teachers will continue to be a need for hire each year. Early career teachers often find themselves sharing teacher mentors as veteran teacher attrition continues to disseminate throughout CMS.

To ensure new teachers feel welcome at CMS, Cedarsville Middle School invites early career teachers to participate in their school's mentoring program. The mentoring program solicits teacher mentors during the summer before the academic year begins. Early career teachers are mandated to attend the school's new teacher orientation during the summer where they engage in a meet and greet with new teacher mentors. During the mentoring meet and greet, teacher mentors and mentees are encouraged to become acquainted and socialize with participants in the mentoring program. The mentoring meet and greet is to promote a

professional learning community within the program as new teachers are not assigned formal mentors during their acquaintances. In the past, new teacher mentors and mentees have also socialized in gatherings scheduled in December and May of the academic year.

During September of the academic year, the principal formally assigns early career teachers with a content and school mentor. Content mentors were mentors who were proficient in the same content as the new teacher. Content mentors were usually curriculum lead teachers. Content mentors were expected to mentor new teachers with content, especially during biweekly curriculum meetings. School mentors were mentors who were in close proximity of the new teacher or who shared similar personalities or backgrounds. School mentors were expected to mentor new teachers with school functioning and daily teacher tasks. School mentors were informal teacher leaders and knowledgeable of the school culture.

The principal releases formal mentoring assignments in September as she likes to continue to establish a professional learning community during the first month of school among all teachers in the school building. This professional learning community is designed to offer new teachers the opportunity to receive mentoring from any teacher in the building rather than new teachers feeling as if they can only communicate with one specific teacher peer, most likely known as their formal mentor.

After formal mentoring assignments are released, new teacher mentors are to mentor their mentees at least one time per week. This one time per week mentoring is officially deemed as Check-In Wednesdays. Along with the mentoring program facilitator, all mentors conduct quick checks with their mentees on Wednesdays. Check-In Wednesdays vary among mentoring pairs as new teachers and their mentors may conduct quick checks with each other on other days of the week or daily. To improve new teacher efficacy, for the first time under the new principal's

leadership, CMS is encouraging new teacher mentors to document at least three mentoring conversations per semester. Documentation templates are modified from the school's districts mentoring program.

For the 2023-2024 academic year, over 30 new teachers were enrolled in the program, with 11 teachers being early career teachers with one to three years of teaching experience. New teachers were assigned mentors that either taught the same subject, grade level, and/or share the same ethnicity. New teachers attended monthly new teacher meetings where professional learning from feedback of a needs-based assessment was shared with new teachers. While all new teacher mentors were invited to attend these meetings, new teacher mentors rotated their attendance. In other words, not all mentoring pairs were represented in these meetings as random new teacher mentors of mentoring pairs were not always present. At the end of the academic year, new teachers advanced in the mentoring program from the cohort of first year teachers at CMS to second year teachers at CMS. During the time of this study, this was the pilot year of Cedarsville Middle School's new teacher mentoring program being a three-year induction program for all new teachers.

### **The Research Participants**

This study's participants included five early career teachers. Each early career teacher had one to three years of teaching experience in the profession and was a participant in the research site's teacher mentoring program. All participants had a formal or informal teacher mentor who they conversed with about job experiences at least twice a week. There were three female, and two male teachers, with only one teacher having traditional teacher preparation instead of alternative teaching training. Teacher participants taught math, science, and language

arts. This section includes personal and professional background information for each early career teacher participant. An overview of the research participants is presented in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2**

*Overview of Research Participants*

Early Career Teacher Participant	Teacher Certification	Subject	Second Career Teacher
Terry McClair	Provisional	Math	Yes
Morgan Murray	Teacher Fellow	Language Arts	Yes
Kenneth Jones	Renewable	Math	Yes
Kathy Smith	Renewable	Physical Science	No
Aubrey Lee	Provisional	Physical Science	No

*Terry McClair*

At the time of this study, Terry McClair was in his first full year of teaching. Teaching was Terry’s second career as Terry was a former warehouse manager who graduated from Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia. Although Terry was embarking on his first year of teaching at the research site, Terry completed one full semester of math teaching at another school in Great Plains School District (GPGS, pseudonym), but unfortunately was not able to complete the entire school year due to personal family reasons.

Terry is the father of four children. After having his third child, Terry and his wife thought it would be best for their family if Terry transitioned from warehouse manager to stay-at-home dad. While a stay-at-home dad, Terry became a youth sports coach. Terry’s interest in teaching was sparked by family and friends who constantly told him he was good with children. Before making the decision to teach, Terry used substitute teaching as an avenue in deciding to

become a teacher. Terry attested, "...I use subbing as a way to see if I wanted to be teaching, kind of on-the-job training." During this study, Terry held a provisional teaching certificate to teach math at Cedarsville Middle School (CMS, a pseudonym).

Terry's content mentor was his math curriculum lead teacher, and his school mentor was a teacher of a different subject but same grade level. Terry's content mentor had five years of experience at the school. The content mentor was a mentor to other new curriculum teachers, leader of the school's district initiative team, a co-coach for the school's Dance Team, and current Teacher of the Year. Terry relied heavily on his school mentor as his content mentor was often unavailable. Terry's school mentor had three years of experience at the school and was the school's co Gifted Certification Contact.

### *Morgan Murray*

Morgan Murray was in her first year of teaching at the time of this study. Teaching was Morgan's second career as Morgan was a cosmetologist before becoming a teacher fellow. As a teacher fellow, Morgan was currently enrolled in a traditional teacher preparation program as a senior at University of North Georgia (UNG). Having 120 hours of student teaching experience, Morgan applied with GPSD (a pseudonym) to work as a full-time teacher while continuing to pursue an undergraduate degree for teacher certification. Morgan described the application process and the program by stating,

Through this program, you have to apply for it is competitive. But when you get in, then it's on you to apply for a job with certain counties that have an agreement with them [University of North Georgia] ...So like GPSD (a pseudonym) has an agreement with them that they would take fellow teachers. So, I get paid. But it's my [class]room, but I'm still in school.

Morgan was proud of her acceptance into a competitive program. She often used knowledge, from the program, such as instructional planning, in her teacher fellow role.

A daughter of two retired educators and single parent of one child, Morgan found it beneficial to emulate her parents by pursuing a teaching profession that was familiar during her childhood and would support her parent responsibilities. During this study, Morgan taught language arts at CMS and simultaneously completed online classes to renew her teacher certification.

Morgan's content mentor was her language arts curriculum lead teacher, and her school mentor was the school's behavior coach. Morgan's content mentor had two years of experience at the school. Morgan relied heavily on her content mentor as her school mentor was often unavailable.

#### *Kenneth Jones*

Kenneth Jones was in his second year of teaching at the time of this study. A graduate of Georgia Southern University, Kenneth pursued other careers before becoming a teacher. After working in the corporate sector for seven years, Kenneth coached youth basketball while being a teacher paraprofessional and long-term substitute. Kenneth outlined these experiences by saying,

I was a parapro too. They [school administrators] asked me to teach about three times.

And I told them no. And then I became a long-time sub. So, I did one classroom for about three months. I decided I was going to teach after that.

Kenneth was unsure if he wanted to continue to teach his subject area as he was also interested in teaching elective courses.

Spending one-year teaching in his Georgia hometown public school system, Rome City Schools, Kenneth had interest of working in a large metropolitan suburban school district.

During this study, Kenneth was fully certified to teach math at CMS and was assistant coach for the school's basketball team.

Kenneth's content mentor was his math curriculum lead teacher, and his school mentor was a teacher of a different subject and grade level. Kenneth's content mentor had two years of experience at the school. The content mentor was a mentor to another new curriculum teacher. Kenneth relied heavily on his school mentor as he disliked his content mentor's personality. Kenneth's school mentor had three years of experience at the school and was the school's Basketball Coach. Kenneth was acquainted with his school mentor before teaching at CMS.

### *Kathy Smith*

At the time of this study, Kathy Smith was in her first year of teaching in the United States. Originally from India, Kathy is a chemistry major who speaks five languages. Kathy tutored and taught at the high school level in science and math content in her native country. After moving to the United States for personal reasons, Kathy became a medical interpreter as she was unaware that she was qualified to teach in American schools. After learning from friends of her eligibility to be a teacher in the United States, Kathy worked to earn her science teacher certification.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Kathy was unable to obtain her college transcript from India to apply for a paraprofessional or teacher position within GPSD. While waiting to receive her college transcript from India, Kathy seized the opportunity to gain knowledge of the United States education system. Kathy sought to understand the nation's K-12 public school system through becoming a teacher substitute for all grade levels, starting from PreK to 12<sup>th</sup> Grade. Kathy recounted,

And I started from the very, from PreK, because I was scared. I don't know anything in

what's going on in this country, how the education system works. So, I started from kindergarten, the PreK and then first grade...all the classes I went primarily from the elementary school.

In addition to learning about the American school system, Kathy earned her United States citizenship during this study.

After receiving her college transcript, Kathy learned through her attendance at various teacher job fairs, that more teacher vacancies were available for middle school science teachers as high school science courses were limited due to being elective classes for students. After studying and passing the science teacher certification exam, Kathy became employed at CMS where she was as a physical science teacher pursuing her Gifted certification during this study.

Kathy's content mentor was her physical science curriculum lead teacher, and her school mentor was a teacher of a different subject and grade level. Kathy's content mentor had two years of experience at the school. The content mentor was a mentor to another new curriculum teacher. Kathy relied heavily on her school mentor as she believed her content mentor to be disorganized. Kathy's school mentor had six years of experience at the school and was a mentor to another same subject grade level teacher. Kathy was friends with her school mentor before teaching at CMS as they shared the same Indian background and attended the same Indian community events.

### *Aubrey Lee*

At the time of this study, Aubrey Lee was a first-year teacher. Aubrey graduated from Georgia Southern University as a chemistry major. During middle school, Aubrey enjoyed learning science. As a college student, Aubrey was a teacher assistant for science courses. With

enjoying both the science content and experience of being a science teacher assistant during college, Aubrey decided to pursue a teaching career.

During this study, Aubrey was a special education co-teacher who taught science, math, and language arts. Despite being a member of a family filled with K-12 educators, Aubrey was surprised about the preparation needed to be an effective teacher. Immediately before this study's data collection, CMS school administration changed Aubrey role from general science teacher to special education co-teacher of math, science, and language arts subjects. For the time of this study, Aubrey held a provisional teaching certificate and was unsure if she wanted to pursue a renewable teacher certification.

Aubrey's content mentor was her science curriculum lead teacher, and her school mentor shared the same subject area and grade level. Aubrey's content mentor had two years of experience at the school. Aubrey relied heavily on her content mentor as their classrooms were closer than the school mentor's classroom. Aubrey's classroom was adjacent to her content mentor's classroom before she changed roles to special education co-teacher. As a special education co-teacher, Aubrey was not reassigned new formal mentors. Aubrey continued to communicate with her content mentor and sought advice from an informal special education mentor.

## **Findings**

Interviews were conducted with early career teachers that focused on their thoughts about conversations with their teacher mentor and topical areas discussed during these conversations with their mentoring partner. Detailed notetaking during classroom observations captured participants' actions, assumptions, and data supporting participant interview transcriptions (Tessier, 2012). The findings from the interviews and classroom observations are reported in the

following categories: communication characteristic of a teacher mentor, teacher mentor personality traits, purpose of the mentoring relationship, topics of mentoring conversations, and role of conversations and observations during early career teacher mentoring.

### *Communication Characteristic of a Teacher Mentor*

Participant responses suggested that teacher mentors should be communicable. For successful transfer of information, Kenneth suggested that teacher mentors should be warm to “build that trust....” Conversations become easier to initiate when early career teachers feel comfortable with their mentors. Trust that develops from comfortability encourages early career teachers to feel open to discussing their job-related tasks. Kenneth explains an example of such comfort when he describes how he would mentor a new teacher. Kenneth would provide his new teacher mentee with a “warm greeting...to make them [early career teacher mentee] feel welcome.” Kenneth further provided an example of how he would build trust within this hypothetical mentoring relationship. Kenneth stated, “...even if we [hypothetical mentoring pair] like went out to lunch, maybe and just talk....”

Kenneth supported his thoughts of mentoring communication by expressing the communication from his mentor stemmed from an “organic friendship” that allowed him to be “able to talk with him [teacher mentor] about all my frustrations or anything that I'm incurring.” In fact, Kenneth mentioned that communication was genuine with his mentor because of their friendship. Kenneth reflected, “I probably already spoke with him [teacher mentor] before I knew he was my mentor.”

Similarly, Terry declared an effective mentor as someone who is warm and caring. Terry associated caring with communication when he shared his thoughts of frequent check ins on new teachers by their mentors. He described an ideal check in as “... at least once a week, as a

minimum, we [mentoring pair] see each other every day in the cafeteria.” Terry further explained the association between care and communication when he clarified that simply seeing each other frequently was not sufficient, rather showing care through talking was needed. Terry reiterated in other words, “Okay, so like, it wouldn’t be a big deal to sit down with each other at lunch and, and chat and chat.” Similarly, Morgan described her teacher mentor as being present to talk. Morgan stated, “I think she [teacher mentor] made a joke the other day saying that she talks to me more than her husband.” Morgan further emphasized, “It’s being able to just, hey, can I come in really quick, I have a question.” And we [mentoring pair] will sit down and talk about anything.”

Like Morgan, Kathy and Aubrey provided more detail in teacher mentors being frequently open to communication with their new teacher mentees. Kathy characterized mentors as “Effective...if I need a little bit of problem if I can share with my mentor and my mentor can help me....” In contrast, Aubrey described an instance where she wished her teacher mentor would have been more open to talking. Aubrey stated that her teacher mentor should have discussed how she should, “... react to certain things quickly, like do not give a ton of warnings to the students. Like respond and implement whatever your consequences are, as soon as they [students] do it [misbehavior], especially within those first couple of weeks.”

Morgan further explained that through talking, teacher mentors should be open-minded. She provided an example when she described her opinion of the worst mentor experience as a counterexample to open-mindedness. Morgan recounts, “Actually, one of my cohort people have a story like this too, but one [teacher mentor] that shuts down every idea that you have.” When new to any profession, it is expected one must gain experience before being able to demonstrate competence for job tasks. Morgan confirms, “Because we [early career teachers] at least through

the school [are] conditioned to know you are new. So just sit down, be quiet and listen.” This belief is often supported through actions of experienced teachers. Morgan explains, “Because a lot of like veteran teachers are like, they’re not gonna, they’re not gonna really listen to what you’re gonna say, because you’re new....”

Morgan highlights the importance of communication with a teacher mentor when she reveals such communication provides support to new teachers. Morgan concludes her counterexample by stating, “...just someone who would shut down any ideas, who just have no support at all....” Morgan recalls her mentor being supportive through communication when she states, “I know, like I kind of explain her, like...in in my [class]room, I did central ideas like puzzle pieces for that main idea. And she's like, I [will] use that in my classroom. I’m like go for it!”

In summary, all participants thought that teacher mentors should be willing to communicate in dialogue about new teacher job related situations. The next category examines early career teachers’ descriptions of personality traits of their teacher mentors.

#### *Teacher Mentor Personality Traits*

In addition to teacher mentors being warm and open to conversations, participants mentioned pleasant personality traits of their teacher mentors. While character traits, like open-mindedness, of an individual are seen over time and through various circumstances, personality traits of an individual are evident from short term acquaintance. Participant responses suggested that their teacher mentors had kind and thoughtful personality traits. Terry spoke positively about his mentor’s personality when he stated, “She’s very nice. Very sweet. Very positive. You know, very, she seems genuine when she asks how I’m doing. Concerned about me.” Similarly, Aubrey gleamed when she spoke about her teacher mentor being kind to bring food to work. Aubrey

recounts, “Oh, she had brought Haitian food...it was her and Dr. Kent’s (a pseudonym) birthday.”

When asked to describe their mentor’s personality, Morgan beamed with her response. Morgan stated,

Like just her being very, I mean, she’s funny, she’s personable. I can come to her with work or personal or school or anything. And it’s never a I’m busy. I’ll talk to you later. I mean, sometimes she’s like, let’s schedule a time. But it’s never a no, you know, just figure it out kind of thing. She’s very hands on and very helpful when...I love that about her. Always in a good mood.

Morgan affirmed that her mentor is “...like my mama figure.” Morgan also described how she felt before meeting her mentor. Morgan shared, “...who’s going to be my mentor? Are they going to spend time, are they going to understand because I had some [peers] in my cohort and...their mentors, they don’t get along. They can’t...it’s very like, complete opposite personalities.” Morgan remembers that her mentor was “...soft spoken and patient when I met her and I was like...I’m gonna love this woman.”

Kenneth also highlighted that his teacher mentor is personable through discussing friendship with his mentoring partner. Kenneth revealed, “...we just became friends, like, go to his house and hang out.” Kathy agreed with Kenneth when she shared the personality of her mentor teacher. Kathy attested, “Friendship means everything, [which] we already have...I need [something] immediate, I get the help from her [teacher mentor]. I don’t have to wait...Yes. Ms. Jones (a pseudonym) is very helpful.”

In summary, the participants believed their teacher mentors demonstrated kind personality traits. All participants glowed when they spoke of their mentor’s delightful

personality. The next category examines early career teachers' thoughts of the purpose of the mentoring relationship.

### *Purpose of the Mentoring Relationship*

In addition to welcoming personality traits of their teacher mentors, all participants alluded to having justified grounds within their mentoring relationship. Terry strongly believed that the mentoring relationship should be meaningful. Terry emphasized his belief when describing the worst experience with a teacher mentor. Terry voiced, "Finding time to meet with them [teacher mentor] ...is a waste of time... that's probably my biggest pet peeve...." Terry described that the many tasks of teaching does not allow time for him to attend a meeting without a purpose. Terry further explained, "And so what really drives me crazy...when I go to a meeting, and I don't need to hear this."

Contrastingly, Terry described the purpose of his mentoring relationship as being productive. Despite being unaware of checklist topics initially presented by his teacher mentor, Terry knew that his mentor was going to support him in a specified area(s) noted on the checklist. Terry explained, "...there's this sheet of these, this checklist things, that goals." Terry was aware of his unawareness as he explained, "I don't really know what any of it was. It was just like, yeah, we'll do that." To counter his pet peeve of losing valuable time, Terry interpreted the checklist as goals or "...things" that "I want to work on...."

Like Terry, when asked what they enjoyed about their mentor, Aubrey and Morgan discussed knowledge from their mentoring relationship. Aubrey recounted, "I think the main thing is she [teacher mentor] seemed pretty knowledgeable." Morgan attested, "...like she [teacher mentor] seemed very knowledgeable of the content." A mentoring relationship is more meaningful with communication from a knowledgeable mentor. Kathy agreed with Aubrey and

Morgan when she described how her mentor knows school specific knowledge in addition to general teaching knowledge. Kathy stated,

Yeah, I learned many things from the YouTube, but quick thing about Cedars (a pseudonym) ...what's that...we add money for the cafeteria? The payments I learned from, I just told well I have to put the money... if I use the cafeteria food, if I eat from cafeteria, so immediately...she is so long [knowledgeable] here. Okay? So that's why she knows everything.

Kathy believes that she had difficulty with technology, so she researches how to use many instructional technology platforms. It is school based technology, such as the student learning management system, that Kathy struggles to navigate.

Similarly, Morgan described an example of how her teacher mentor's knowledge helped her to navigate through her first year of teaching. Morgan shared an example of when "...I have no idea how I'm going to teach this" and she "...ran to her [teacher mentor] room." Morgan remembers, "She [teacher mentor] was tutoring, and I was like, I need you. What am I doing? And she's like, Oh, just do it this way." Observational notes indicated that Morgan engaged in collaborative instructional planning as confidence in her content knowledge was evident during her instructional delivery.

Kenneth also revealed the importance of professional objectives in the mentoring relationship. Contrastingly, Kenneth mentioned how his mentoring relationship's purpose could improve. Kenneth stated, "And to be honest, I think we [mentoring pair] may have been too friendly. So, I do I think we can increase professionalism." Kenneth further describes how his friendship with his mentor at times has the potential to be playful. Kenneth reflected on a reason for subjectivity by voicing, "Or too, maybe that he [teacher mentor] feels like he don't want to

hurt my feelings like, so he [teacher mentor] might don't want to say something, you know, I'm saying because he's "Oh, that's my friend."

In summary, the participants expressed a desire for a proactive and productive mentoring relationship. The next category examines the topics of conversations between early career teachers and their teacher mentors.

### *Topics of Mentoring Conversations*

Participant responses highlighted several topics of conversations with their teacher mentors. Most participants discussed classroom management. Classroom management is the foundation of effective instruction as Morgan discussed her first conversation with her mentor. Morgan explained, "We have talked about some kind of thing, it was a little bit of behavioral stuff, like in the beginning of the year, setting that procedure, she was useful."

Morgan further describes the importance of classroom management being the foundation of teaching when she shares how her mentor demonstrated teaching classroom management routines to students. Morgan recounts, "I was like, "Okay, I can get up here. And I can tell them.... She's like, No, I show mine [students]. I will get up and will walk and I will have them get up and do it." Despite talking about classroom management with her mentor, classroom observational notes indicated Morgan struggled with student excessive talking. Morgan admits, "I have one [student], like do not listen to that [teacher]. She's [teacher mentor] like, we'll [mentoring pair] try doing this and see if it works."

In comparison, Kenneth shared how his struggle with time management affected his classroom management. He stated, "Coming from all my last school, we were on block schedule. And now we're on, I'm not sure what this call is, standard schedule? So that was a big adjustment for me." Kenneth implies his adjustment is for duration of his lesson for a shorter

class period as opposed to his usual longer class periods. Kenneth stated, “So I had to actually I went to his class and see how he, yeah, observe him see how he handles like, his interactions and stuff. How did he move? How did he pace himself?” Kenneth benefited from this observation as field notes indicate Kenneth was able to pace his lesson within the allotted class timeframe.

Kenneth attested “that’s [the observation] been [was] very helpful for me.”

Second to classroom management, participant responses included instructional planning and instructional strategies as topics of conversation. Aubrey shared in planning for her lessons, her mentor helped her prepare materials for a lab. Morgan states, “So, she’ll be like, say we’re doing a lab to make sure I know what certain things are; because, like I might not know what a, what the...flashlight look like.” Aubrey continued sharing conversations about instructional planning with her teacher mentor when she stated, “...like in the morning, if I have questions over like a warmup, where I don’t feel like I can get the kids all the way [learning], I’ll go ask....”

Terry also commented on instructional planning as a topic of conversation with his teacher mentor. Terry stated, “We talked about...just group lessons, differentiated lessons....” During his interview, Terry discussed how his mentor modeled differentiation in her classroom by showing him a video of her teaching a lesson. During the video, Terry stated that his mentor asked, “...hey...look, here’s my class, this is what we did...What do you notice? What do you see? Do you have any questions? What do you think?” Terry expressed his thoughts about the importance of the conversation about the video with his mentor. Terry voiced, “...being able to like, you can tell me, Well, this is what it should look like....”

Terry further stated that he attempted to “kind of do it [differentiation] that way” for his lesson. Terry recounted “I didn’t have the kids rotate to different stations. I just mixed up where they were sitting and group that....” Notes from Terry’s classroom observation revealed that

Terry implemented student group work for collaboration; however, limited differentiation was observed. Terry did indicate in his interview that "...I gave a formative, and that formative determined where the students sat the next day, who they sat with...then each group had their own lesson...some [assignments] were digital, some paper..."

Morgan detailed a conversation of instructional planning by voicing, "... we [mentoring pair] did a characterization yesterday and I said, well, how do you know we were talking about the story? How do you know she's strong?" With clarifying questions to her mentor, Morgan was able to strengthen her content knowledge in planning for her lesson. While observing Morgan, she provided students with graphic organizers as visual representation of a story's characterization. Before assigning students to complete the graphic organizer in Google Classroom, a common technology platform used by teachers at the school, Morgan prompt the students to compare and contrast characters by referencing her modeling of characterization in a previous lesson.

Morgan, Terry, and Kathy shared some instructional strategies discussed with their teacher mentors. Morgan shared, "I'm like, I know what I'm teaching, but I don't know how to teach it." Morgan explained how her mentor "kind of taught me through" strategies to teach language arts to her students. Morgan remembered how she learned instructional strategies from her mentor when she recalls, "She's [teacher mentor] like, and this is what I'm doing in my [class]room. So, then I was able to kind of model something. Oh, that makes so much more sense now." Field notes detail Morgan's confidence during her instructional delivery.

Kathy discussed small group instruction as an instructional strategy that she discussed with her mentor. Kathy expressed,

She just told that she just starts with a with a problem already there in the opening and then she gives the mini lessons and then she just take [data]... given as assessments and for some formative as quick assessment. And then she comes, she comes to know that who will... who will be her small group instruction.

While Kathy provided a clear detailed explanation of small group instruction described by her mentor, it was observed that Kathy was not able to successfully implement this instructional strategy in her lesson.

Observation notes included that Kathy was not able to effectively engage in small group instruction because of student off task behaviors. At the time of her interview, Kathy had not implemented small group instruction in her lessons because of her self-assessment. Kathy explained, “Because if I focus on those few people, the others start talking. So that's the one that's a problem I faced.”

Kathy proceeded sharing the topic of small group instruction by stating, “They [are] those who can work independently, they can work independently, those who need some help, they can find friends, they he she makes pairs, so that they can learn from each other, share each other.” It is evident during Kathy’s classroom observation that she was beginning to pair students as students collaborated on a task. However, her attempts have proven not to be consistently effective because of poor classroom management.

Contrastingly, Terry spoke about how he wanted to change some instructional strategies in his classroom and sought advice about differentiated instruction from his teacher mentor.

Terry stated,

It's been one big lesson, everybody do the same work for the most part. And you know, I need to be kind of heading that direction, differentiating my lessons, because the students

are on different learning levels. And I need to kind of start gearing the work towards those learning levels instead of just one size fits all.

Terry's classroom observations notes reveal that he frequently collected formative assessment data. Through this data that Terry was attempting to differentiate lessons to meet individual student academic levels. Terry shared that his mentor explained, "The formative should show you how to differentiate your lesson the next day."

Participants also discussed goal setting as a topic of conversation with their mentor. Similar to Terry who discussed the checklist of objective goals for new teachers, Morgan commented, "Yeah, we've [mentoring pair] kind of been talking about our goals in the past, and we just kind of started having those meetings about what my teaching goals will be."

Lastly, Kathy and Aubrey shared that they discussed specific school related topics with their teacher mentors. Kathy revealed that her teacher mentor discussed, "...how to report the [students'] minor [behavioral] incident and how to do that [in] this thing inside Casto (a pseudonym)." In addition to learning about the school's learning management system, Kathy stated, "I asked her [teacher mentor] about the Google the lesson plan" a common technology platform used by teachers at the school.

Aubrey was enthusiastic to discuss how her teacher mentor helped with her transition to the Special Education Department. Aubrey expressed of the most beneficial topics in conversation with her teacher mentor, "I guess details, because I don't know what all information I need." Aubrey recollected how effective tips for her new teacher role was shared from her mentor though leisure conversation. Aubrey stated, "Because like today, I talked to Ms. Mooks (a pseudonym), I forgot what I had asked her. But she showed me how to do an IEP [Individual Education Plan] ...I learned a lot from that conversation." Observation notes indicate Aubrey

followed student IEP behavioral accommodations during class. When observing Aubrey's lesson, Aubrey was seen tracking student behaviors for special education data collection.

In summary, participants shared topics of conversation with their teacher mentors to include classroom management, instructional planning and strategies, goals, and school related concerns. The next category examines the role of conversations and observations during early career teacher (ECT) mentoring.

### *Role of Conversations and Observations During ECT Mentoring*

Participant responses varied on their opinion about the role of conversations and observations within their mentoring relationships. While some participants valued observations, other participants deemed conversations as essential for effective mentoring. Kathy believed that observations were more important than conversations because she maintained observations fueled conversations. Kathy indicated, "Because if she [teacher mentor] comes and observes me, she [teacher mentor] can find my flaws... And she [teacher mentor] can rectify that... She [teacher mentor] can give me the feedback so that I couldn't [could] improve." Like Kathy, Terry responded that his ideal experience of teacher mentoring would consist of conversations about observations. Terry stated, "Maybe [teacher mentor] stepping in observing your class and how you how you teach, kind of kind of like a partner." Terry also shared his thoughts about viewing observation videos, "...being able to see what it [observation of mentor's lesson] looked like and visually put what she [teacher mentor] said and from words into visual was very helpful."

While Terry valued observations with his teacher mentor, he did admit that conversations were important. Terry emphasized conversations when he spoke of observation debriefs. Terry stated, "What you have to have [is] communication. So, we [mentoring pair] both were [are] all

on the same page.” Kenneth agreed that conversations are for communication, however for a different purpose with mentoring observations. Kenneth explained,

... I think if you can handle your conversations, then observation is nothing. So, it just depends on if you're receptive. So, I think that conversation you have, ““Hey how do you feel? Are you okay with me observing you?”” ““Hey, first, can you tell me what I need to do, what I [can] work on?”” And that way I know if I'm applying it, and then maybe you [teacher mentor] can come observe me.

Kenneth alluded that observations were more beneficial on an as-needed basis, explaining,

... like from my last job, they [administrators] probably didn't do enough observations... you can do whatever, as long as nobody in your room fighting... Then they come into your rooms. And they [administrators] always mentioned we're behind on observation. ... You wanted an observation so you can improve, but I don't think here I think conversations with [will] triumph observation.

In reference to Cedar Middle School’s culture of teacher evaluation, Kenneth described his observations “...by every single AP [assistant principal] and a principal at one time...is overwhelm[ing] by its constant feel like you're doing something wrong, even though that's not the case.” Kenneth concluded that “... adding more [ of mentoring observations]to that [teacher evaluation observations], it'd be too stressful” because “a lot of people don’t want to be observed [because]...you don’t want your mentor to judge you...”

Like Kenneth, Morgan explained her value of mentoring conversations. Morgan indicated, “And not being able to, to observe, the talking helps a lot.” As a teacher fellow, Morgan believed that “Because I have my own [class]room I know my kids’ personalities and being able to say, Okay, this is what she [teacher mentor] says, how can I apply this to my

[class]room?” Morgan’s belief helped her to feel that “... the conversations are equally important [to observations], it’s [conversations] like, actually watching.”

Comparingly, Aubrey described why she values conversations by sharing an example with her teacher mentor, “She [teacher mentor] gives very detail and the things that I don't, I wasn't, you know, she's a little bit more elaborate, like, I can ask her about one kid who might need to take a test...” Morgan values the “long answer[s]” as she believes these “tangent[s]” are “...all useful. It's not like random things. It's just, you get more information than you thought you were gonna get.”

In summary, participant responses suggested the role of conversations and observations in a teacher mentoring relationship to be dependent on a teacher’s need, however mentoring conversations are needed with or without mentoring observations.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented a contextual overview of the study’s early career teachers and the research findings from the participants. The findings are presented in the following categories: communication characteristic of a teacher mentor, teacher mentor personality traits, the purpose of the mentoring relationship, topics of mentoring conversations, and roles of conversations and observations during early career teacher mentoring.

Early career teacher participants were eager for mentors who communicated freely about teaching and job tasks. Most early career teachers described their mentors as being kind and knowledgeable. Mentor teachers who shared knowledge with their mentee strengthened the mentoring relationship as early career teachers believed these mentors to provide them with meaningful advice. Mentoring conversations of classroom management, instructional planning and strategies, and school related topics were reported by early career teacher participants. While

some new teachers wanted to observe their mentor concerning these topics, all new teacher participants agreed that conversations were necessary to implement into classroom practices.

Chapter 5 provides specific themes from a comprehensive analysis of the findings presented in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Stressful working conditions and lack of support have perpetuated the teacher shortage in this nation (Ingersoll et al., 2018). With such a rapid increase in teacher vacancies, researchers are recommending schools and school districts invest in teacher mentoring programs (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Squires, 2019; Wexler, 2020). New teacher mentoring programs provide an opportunity for mentor teachers to support early career teachers as they assimilate into the school culture and overall teaching profession (Renbarger & Davis, 2019; Squires, 2019). It is timely that further study is needed on new teacher mentoring to improve teacher retention. With a focus on teacher mentor actions from educational policymakers, enhancements to mentoring programs may decrease teacher attrition (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Research positions that the “revolving door” of teachers decelerates with mentoring programs given that this type of support decreases teacher attrition by 12% compared to attrition in other professions (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Warsame & Valles, 2018). Teachers have reported mentoring to be one of the most important aspects of their first year in the profession because it decreases anxiety and it accelerates learning pedagogy (Richter et al., 2013). This study was designed to explore the phenomena that occur between early career teachers and their experiences from conversations with their mentor.

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. The research aimed to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations.

Through semi-structured interviews and observation fieldnotes, the contributions of mentoring conversations from the perspectives of early career teachers were examined. Because communication between teacher and mentor is a primary feature of mentoring programs, it is significant to understand mentoring conversations and the actions that follow for the benefit of early career teachers. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?
2. What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?
3. How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?

Chapter 5 includes themes based on the findings. The themes presented in this chapter relate to the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the theoretical perspectives.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

In this case study, the findings included early career teachers' views of teacher mentoring, their topics of mentoring conversations, and their implementation of classroom practices from mentoring discussions within Cedarsville Middle School. Data from interviews and observation fieldnotes were the sources of documentation.

The theoretical frameworks of this case study were social constructivism and sensemaking. Social constructivism and sensemaking were the foundational pillars of data analysis as early career teachers explained their interpretation of classroom experiences as a result from interactions with their mentor. Thematic analysis provided advantages and

disadvantages for early career teacher from teacher mentoring during one of their first years of teaching.

Findings from this study presented in Chapter 4 were produced from interviews. Codes were created from repeated ideas in the data using deductive and inductive reasoning (Bendassolli, 2013; Williams & Moser, 2019). Line-by-line coding helped with comparing data to generate categories based on the research questions. Hence, themes emerged from the data that addressed each research question as illustrated in Table 5.1

**Table 5.1**

*Summary of Research Question Themes*

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Themes</b>
What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?	Theme 1: Relationship Building is the Foundation of Mentoring Conversations Theme 2: Mentoring Conversations Promote Clarity that Enhances Understanding
What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?	Theme 3: Topics of Mentoring Conversations Influence Teacher Efficacy
How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?	Theme 4: Active Listening During Mentoring Conversations Encourages Implementation of Classroom Practices

The next section details an analysis of each theme connected to the research questions of the study.

### **Research Question 1**

After the COVID-19 pandemic, teacher shortages in this nation grew. To remedy an increase in teacher attrition, educational leaders relied on alternative teacher certification programs to fill teacher vacancies. As a result, early career teachers, who are often

inexperienced, entered classrooms more underprepared for teaching (Rose & Sughrue, 2020). New teachers are now in need of effective teacher mentoring.

New teacher mentoring provides beginning teachers with pedagogical and emotional support to improve student learning (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Kutsyuruba et al., 2020; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Zepeda, 2020). Research reports that new teachers benefited from mentors who had training in empathetic listening skills and other communication techniques (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Long et al., 2012; Michailidi & Stavrou, 2021; Strong & Baron, 2004). While studies report new teachers benefited from being mentored by trained mentors, more research is needed to understand aspects of mentoring, such as mentoring conversations, that need enhancements for professional development. With this information, teacher mentors will be equipped with knowledge of when and how to address topics of conversation with early career teachers.

The first research question of this study sought thoughts about conversations with their teacher mentors from Cedarsville Middle School's early career teachers. The data analysis revealed that new teachers were more willing to talk to their mentor when there was a social connection present. Additionally, early career teachers desired to gain professional learning from discussions with their mentors. Essentially, the first two themes describe how early career teachers believe relationship building to be the foundation of mentoring conversations and mentoring conversations to provide clarity that enhances understanding.

### **THEME 1: Relationship Building Is the Foundation of Mentoring Conversations**

Cedarsville Middle School initially provided early career teachers an opportunity to meet the schools' teacher mentors during new teacher orientation. Formal mentoring assignments were not released by CMS administration at the new teacher orientation so to promote a school wide

professional learning community. This delay impeded the work of the mentors with the new teachers. However, early career teachers were expected to collaborate with all teacher colleagues before relying on one formal mentor. As early career teachers socialized with various experienced teachers at the school, they ultimately formed a bond with select colleagues. Through their bonds, early career teachers were able to learn common interests and dispositions of other teachers. As school administration recognized specific social interactions between early career teachers and teacher mentors, formal mentor assignments were established for effective mentoring conversations to take place.

Kenneth confirmed that effective teacher mentoring is “all about the first initial relationship building.” Kenneth “just became friends” with his mentor after learning that they attended the same college. Similarly, Morgan confirmed that she unknowingly met her formal mentor during a curriculum meeting. Morgan and her mentor “talked for a little bit” and “kind of clicked” because her mentor “was personable.” Morgan attested that she knew she was going to “love this woman.” In fact, Morgan admitted that she could “see herself going to go to her [mentor] for things [even] if she [mentor] was not assigned” to her as a mentor. Kathy acknowledged that she was friends with her mentor before being employed at the school and their “friendship means everything.”

Kenneth was the only participant who discussed that early career teachers should be allowed to choose their mentors based on their relationship because “they might not connect with the person that you are assigned to.” Terry and Aubrey did not discuss building a relationship with their mentors, but both participants related to their mentors as they taught the same grade level or academic subject. In fact, Terry attested that if he was a mentor to an early career teacher, he would use “free time to get to know them [early career teacher mentee].” Terry

preferred his mentor talk with him “not even necessarily about teaching” but “just to get to know each other better.”

With a positive relationship, it was easier for early career teachers to have conversations with their mentors. Within these relationships, likable personality traits of teacher mentors helped to make conversations effortless for early career teachers. Being friendly, caring, and considerate were some of the likeable personality traits of teacher mentors described by the early career teacher participants. Nice personality traits from teacher mentors strengthen a mentoring relationship as they help new teachers build confidence as a teacher. New teachers are more willing to talk about their shortcomings and potential risk-taking if their mentors have kind personalities. Cedarsville Middle School looked for teacher mentors who were positive, helpful, and energetic. Such personality traits from teacher mentors helped build strong relationships between teacher mentor and mentee that ultimately produced effective mentoring conversations.

All early career teacher participants reported personality traits of kindness and helpfulness from their mentors. Terry noted that his mentor was “very kind” in that his mentor “seemed genuine” and “concerned about me.” Terry believed that a kind mentor could act as a “partner” in a mentoring relationship. Comparingly, Kenneth confirmed that his mentor has “been very helpful” through making him “believe he has the best intentions for me.” Kenneth believed his mentor to be trustworthy as he shared “anything I say with him stays with him” and “I do not think he gives me any wrong advice.”

Aubrey and Kathy agreed that their mentors were thoughtful. Morgan revealed that her mentor was “kind”, but also “soft spoken and patient” and “always in a good mood.” Morgan discussed how her teacher preparation cohort members did not “click with” their mentors

because they had “opposite personalities.” Kenneth and Aubrey further explained that their mentors were considerate in that they were always “available.”

Mentoring relationships are strengthened when mentors are present to talk about various topics. Mentors who are positive and open to converse help early career teachers feel welcomed to the teaching profession and comfortable in their professional growth alongside their mentor. Mentoring conversations are not possible without early career teachers and their mentors being open to communication. Cedarsville Middle School’s New Teacher Mentoring Program required that all teacher mentors documented mentoring conversations at least three times per semester. With this initiative, teacher mentors were motivated to talk to their early career teacher mentees.

Kenneth explained how his mentor was open to talk about “all my frustrations or anything that I’m incurring.” Morgan agreed that her mentor offered to help with “anything you need” and to “just let me [mentor] know.” Morgan also expressed that she could “contact her [mentor] on the weekend and that “those small things make such a big impact.” Morgan declared that she “talked to my [mentor] more than I talked to anybody else” and her mentor being “available to talk makes me feel better.”

Kathy also confirmed that her mentor was “even [available] on the weekends” in that she only had to “just text her.” Kathy’s mentor best supported Kathy by “whenever I have [a problem] ...she immediately just gives me the solution.” Kathy was mindful of the number of times she contacted her mentor as she believed her mentor was “so busy” and she did not “want her [mentor] to leave her work.” Aubrey recounted that she “had her [mentor] number” and was able to “call me [mentor] anytime you come up with a question later.” Aubrey remembered that her mentor often “went on a tangent” to provide “useful...information than you thought you

were gonna get.” Terry stated that an ideal mentor would be someone who would “constantly check in on you” to discuss how to “manage how to become a teacher” as his worst teacher mentoring experience was when he “did not get to spend a lot of time with her [mentor].”

Early career teacher participants were grateful that their mentors were available. Kathy was the only participant that reported a challenge in availability as her teacher mentor taught a different grade level and was therefore not near Kathy’s classroom. Kathy desired her mentor to teach the same grade level as this would provide an opportunity for them to have “the same planning time.” Relationships are strengthened when teacher mentors are available as Kathy described the “difficulty we [mentoring pair] are both facing because our planning time is different.” The different planning times resulted in limited mornings and afternoons to converse about teacher tasks. Kathy also believed that her mentor struggled with availability because their classrooms were located on different floors of the school. In not sharing proximity and the same planning time, Kathy declared that mentoring was “difficult for her [mentor].”

Lastly, positive mentoring relationships are enhanced with knowledgeable mentors. Knowledgeable mentors build relationships with new teacher mentees as early career teachers desire to talk and listen to the expertise of experienced colleagues. Cedarsville Middle School assigned early career teachers with a formal content and formal staff mentor. The content mentor was assigned to help provide curriculum knowledge to early career teachers. Content mentors were usually teacher leaders of curriculum areas. The staff mentor was assigned to help provide information of the school’s operations to new teachers. Early career teachers relied on the mentor who was knowledgeable and who they mostly related to in interests and personality.

Kenneth discussed how he wanted to choose a mentor with experience. Kenneth revealed that he had “been teaching the same amount of time” as his mentor and that his mentor had

experience in only “one school system.” Kenneth “prefer[ed] a veteran [mentor] ...who has been here [teaching] ten years or more” or “somebody who has been [teaching] in multiple school systems.” Kenneth claimed with a veteran mentor, he could “get wisdom on any topic because you have experienced a variety of things” such as, earned “accolade[s], like...did you get nominated for Teacher of the Year?” Kenneth believed experienced teacher mentors could provide him with knowledge that would “help guide me more” as he related teacher mentoring to choosing a doctor. Kenneth questioned, “do you want the young doctor who just got out of grad school” to the “guy who has been doing 15 years of surgery.”

Similar to Kenneth, Kathy revealed that she choose her staff mentor because she had been employed at Cedarsville Middle School “so long...so that's why she knows everything.” Additionally, Kathy chose her staff mentor “because we [mentoring pair] already had a relationship before” and because of their prior relationship, she “don’t have to wait” for information. Morgan revealed her content mentor may “schedule a time” to “sit down and talk about anything.” Specifically, Morgan discussed how her mentor “helps me in my classroom” by “knowing I can just call her and she can answer a question.” Morgan further explained how her informal mentors “all work together” providing knowledge “maybe not content, but... classroom stuff.” Aubrey agreed with Kathy and Morgan in that her mentor was “pretty knowledgeable.”

Terry and Kathy were the only participants who discussed how their mentors who taught different academic subjects were not as knowledgeable for them with curriculum. Terry reported that he believed his mentor “does not understand what I am seeing and what I am supposed to be doing” because she taught Science instead of Math. Terry thought that his mentor’s expertise “maybe doesn't necessarily jive with how [his classroom] should run.” Terry preferred to have

the same grade level and subject area teacher mentor. Kathy wished that her mentor was teaching Physical Science as her mentor “could have...help in [creating] the lesson plans.”

A knowledgeable mentor with likeable personality traits contributes to a positive mentoring relationship. Although early career teachers may like their mentor’s personality, teacher mentors who do not teach the same grade level or academic subject may negatively impact relationship building between new teachers and their mentors. Relationship building is imperative for mentoring conversations as early career teachers feel more comfortable to talk and listen to their mentors when they can offer expertise that have meaning. The second theme delves deeper into the perspectives of mentoring conversations for early career teachers.

## **THEME 2: Mentoring Conversations Provide Clarity that Enhances Understanding**

Cedarsville Middle School encouraged teacher mentors to establish a check-in with their new teacher mentees for at least one time per week. New teachers of the mentoring program were expected to know the day of the week and time that they were to meet with their mentor. At least three formal meetings between early career teachers and their mentors per semester were required within the new teacher mentoring program. During the check-in and formal meetings, conversations provided new teachers with information that they could use in their daily tasks as teachers.

Terry explained that because he “only have so much time to get the planning done” that he appreciated that “time to meet with them [mentor] was [not] a waste of time.” Terry emphasized that conversations without purpose was his “biggest pet peeve.” Similarly, Aubrey agreed that she was grateful to have a mentor that did not waste her time in providing useless information. Aubrey’s mentor often “went on a tangent and did a lot more than what I probably asked” but “eventually all that information would be useful.”

Morgan was appreciative that her mentor provided her with content knowledge through conversation. In discussing how her mentor helped her with characterization, Morgan attested the conversation's purpose was to help her apply characterization in context and her mentor's conversation technique of "asking questions" was "so much fun to watch [experience]." Kathy and Kenneth were the only participants that did not discuss the value of their time for mentoring conversations, however they both emphasized their mentors always have the time to talk with them.

The purpose of mentoring conversations was supported by goals established between early career teachers and their mentors. Cedarsville Middle School mandated that during the first formal meeting with early career teachers, mentors were to discuss professional learning goals that early career teachers desired to achieve. After the first formal meeting, professional goals became the focus of the mentoring relationship, further making future mentoring conversations meaningful.

Terry discussed this "checklist [of] goals" that his mentor presented to him during their first formal meeting. Terry expressed that differentiated instruction was the professional learning goal that "I want to work on" as he has "tried to...model what she [mentor] has shown me" of differentiating instruction. Terry further explained "the purpose of my mentorship" is to be "in this together" as the "whole goal." Morgan agreed that she had "those meetings about what my teaching goals will be" with her mentor. Morgan understood the intentions of the conversations with her mentor to help with "teaching where we want to be [comfortable]." Contrastingly, Kathy desired her mentoring conversations to focus on goals created by flaws identified during observations by her mentor. Kathy believed that when her mentor "observes me, she can find my flaws...to rectify" through conversation.

Kenneth disclosed that his mentor “may have been too friendly” to effectively help him create and achieve his professional learning goal. Because of their strong friendship, Kenneth believed that his mentor did not “want to hurt my feelings, so he [mentor] do not want to say something.” Kenneth revealed that he desired for meaningful conversations as he wanted to inform his mentor “you can guide me, you can lead me, there is nothing you can say that is gonna hurt me.”

Early career teachers desired mentoring conversations with meaning to help them achieve goals. Mentoring conversations that have purpose ultimately help early career teachers experience job satisfaction and improve their teaching ability. The third theme focuses on topical areas of mentoring conversations.

## **Research Question 2**

As the demand increases for teachers, school districts are encouraging more teacher applicants to enroll in alternative teacher certification programs (Aragon, 2016) Alternative teacher certification programs often provide new teachers with on the job training that necessitates effective teacher mentoring. As new teachers balance teacher preparation with in field teacher tasks, teacher mentoring provides instructional and psychological support (Hong & Matsko, 2019). More information is needed for when such support is most beneficial to new teachers throughout the academic year.

A study reported topics of mentoring conversations that were most discussed between new teachers and their mentors. Research found that these topics were often not needed by new teachers and further revealed topics of discussion that were most wanted by early career educators (Grossman et al., 2012). With additional research into topics of mentoring

conversations, mentor teachers will be knowledgeable of the most effective time within the new teacher cycle (Moir, 1999) that certain topics are beneficial to discuss with new teachers.

The second research question of this study sought topics of conversations between early career teachers and their mentors at Cedarsville Middle School. The data analysis indicated that new teachers desired discussions of information pertaining to classroom practices and school culture. The third theme describes classroom management, instructional planning, and school related operations as topics of mentoring conversations that influence teacher efficacy.

### **THEME 3: Topics of Mentoring Conversations Influence Teacher Efficacy**

Cedarsville Middle School's New Teacher Mentoring Program provided professional learning to teacher mentors related to the potential topics to discuss with their early career teacher mentee. These topics were suggested to be discussed during specific times of the academic year. For instance, parent conferences and grading practices were discussed at the beginning and mid-year of the mentoring program. Teacher mentors were also encouraged to discuss topics related to their new teacher mentees' immediate needs and professional learning goals.

Classroom management was the most emphasized topic of conversation between early career teachers and their mentors. Kenneth disclosed that he "had an email that I did not know how to respond to" about an unruly student and his mentor discussed with him how to "respond to that email." Morgan indicated that she had "one [student, who does] not listen" to her during class instruction. Morgan expressed her mentor shared behavioral strategies for this student by stating "try doing this [behavioral strategy] and see if it works." Morgan got "a good idea of her [mentor] explaining" what her mentor "does in her room" and "what she tells them [students]." Kathy admitted that "if I focus on those few people [during small group instruction], the others

[students] start talking.” Kathy’s mentor discussed how to control student talking during small group instruction.

Terry and Aubrey were the only participants that did not report classroom management as a topic of their mentoring conversations. Classroom observations of Terry revealed that he did not have challenges with classroom management. Although Aubrey had a change in teacher roles before her classroom observations, Aubrey acknowledged she wished she did not “underestimate classroom management” as “there was so much I had to learn” and “they [school administrators] do not give you a month” of professional learning before being in the classroom with students. Aubrey admits that she now takes more seriously past mentoring conversations with her former mentor about classroom management. Aubrey will “respond and implement...consequences as soon as students [misbehave].” Aubrey shared that she is “contacting them [parents] a little bit faster than I was.”

Instructional planning was the second most talked about topic in mentoring conversations for early career teachers. Terry confirmed his mentor invested a large amount of time in advising him about using data from student formative assessments. Terry reported that his mentor taught him to not “use this [formative assessment] as quiz grades.” Terry’s mentor discussed how “the formative should show you how to differentiate your lesson [for] the next day.” Terry’s mentor took time to discuss “videos of her students” in “what we [mentor and students] did in her class.” Terry expressed that he “watch this video together” with his mentor “and then [went] back and dissect the video.” Terry shared questions that his mentor asked, such as “What did you notice? What did you see? Do you have any questions? What do you think about this?” Terry appreciated that his mentor could “tell me...what it should look like” but he emphasized that “what she said from words [put] into visual is very helpful.”

Morgan also shared how her mentor helped her with instructional planning. Morgan revealed that because she “know the content,” her mentor helped her “get around those barriers” of not “know[ing] how to teach this [content].” Morgan’s mentor “kind of talk and work with [me]” on “how I can make this [lesson] more active.” As Morgan’s curriculum lead, Morgan stated that when asked, “What am I doing?,” her mentor always replied, “Oh, just do it this way.”

Comparingly, Aubrey voiced how her mentor would discuss “[science] lab set up...in the morning[s]” to make sure her “[science] labs are going right” and answer any “questions over a warm up.” In Aubrey’s new teacher role, Aubrey shared how her mentor “showed me how to do an IEP [Individual Education Plans (IEP)].” Kathy reported her mentor discussed “small group instruction” and “gifted certification” as the only instructional topics because she desired mentoring on usage of various technology platforms such as “Google Classroom.” Kenneth was the only participant who did not express instructional planning as a topic of conversation with his mentor.

Lastly, school related operations were a topic of conversation between early career teachers and their mentor. Both Aubrey and Kathy discussed how their mentors communicated about the school’s learning management system. Aubrey’s mentor discussed how “you can see ...student profile for my students” special education caseload as she may not be the students’ teacher and know “how they are performing...at home.” Aubrey emphasized she “learned a lot from that conversation” with her mentor. Kathy also revealed her mentor discussed how to “how to report the minor incident [student misbehavior]” in the school’s learning management system. Additionally, Kathy shared that her mentor communicated how to use the school’s electronic payment system to purchase school lunch from the cafeteria.

Kenneth indicated that he would “call them [mentor] every morning” to ask if teachers “have [a] meeting” that requires him to “need to get to work at 8:00am or 8:30am?” Kenneth reported this conversation to be “vital” as it helped him to be prompt to work. Terry and Morgan were the only participants who did not report school related issues as a topic of conversation with their mentors; however, Morgan discussed how informal mentors helped with school related matters. Morgan voiced that “because I am across from the [school’s] mail room...every teacher that pops their head in [my classroom]” asks “How was your day?” at Cedarsville Middle School.

School related operations, instructional planning, and classroom management were the topics of mentoring conversations for early career teachers. Classroom management was the most talked about topic in the mentoring conversations as early career teachers desired advise on how to ensure a positive learning environment for their students. After classroom management, instructional planning was the next most discussed topic of conversation as early career teachers were eager to effectively teach their content to students. The fourth theme explores the classroom observations of early career teachers as they attempted to put these topics of conversation into classroom practices.

### **Research Question 3**

Effective classroom practices create a safe learning environment for students to learn. While early career teachers learn classroom practices in their traditional and alternative teacher certification programs, classroom practices are more likely to become more effective with experience. Knowledgeable mentors who are available to communicate about teacher actions in the classroom can provide meaningful counsel to early career teachers during their experiences.

Researchers have reported how teacher mentors should communicate with their mentees, but attested more research is needed to understand if such communication techniques were transferred into new teacher classroom practices (Michailidi & Stavrou, 2021; Strong & Baron, 2004). The third research question sought an investigation into how teachers used their mentoring conversations in their classroom practices at Cedarsville Middle School.

#### **THEME 4: Active Listening During Mentoring Conversations Encourages**

##### **Implementation of Classroom Practices**

Teacher mentors within the Cedarsville Middle School's New Teacher Mentoring Program were required to document at least three formal meetings with their early career teacher mentees. Teacher mentors were encouraged to use a checklist of professional learning goals to guide the purpose of the first formal mentoring conversation in helping new teachers set a goal(s) to achieve over time. Subsequent mentoring conversations were to support new teachers in accomplishing their goals. Teacher mentors were to log topics of conversations with their mentees. Early career teachers reported classroom management, instructional planning, and school related issues as the most talked about topics of mentoring conversations that were to be present in their classroom practices.

Morgan discussed that she talked about "behavioral stuff" with her mentor "in the beginning of the year." During Morgan's classroom observation, Morgan demonstrated that she attempted "to take what she [mentor] does and transfer it into here [classroom]." Morgan described her mentor shared behavioral strategies for students to be "accountable for their reading" by using a "cup system for questions" to randomly ask students during class instruction. This strategy was to motivate students to complete their class assignments in lieu of engaging in misconduct. Morgan explained that she can "take hers [mentor's strategy] and then kind of make

it into my own.” Morgan did not use the same “cup system” strategy during her classroom observation but from actively listening to her mentor, Morgan asked various students random content-related questions throughout the lesson. This strategy did decrease student misbehavior; however, there were students off task in Morgan’s class at the time of the classroom observation.

Kenneth revealed that he talked about his “struggle of time management” for lesson implementation without student misbehavior. Kenneth observed his mentor’s class to witness “How he [mentor] paced himself?” During Kenneth’s classroom observation, it was evident that his interactions with his mentor improved his time management for a positive effect on student actions. Kenneth paced himself though three parts of his lesson without noticeable student misconduct as there was no time for students to engage in leisure activity. While Kenneth observed his mentor with a focus on time management, Kenneth emphasized that actively listening during conversations about time management with his mentor influenced his decision to observe his mentor for such matter.

Kathy shared that she talked about how to conduct “small group instruction” with her mentor. Kathy’s mentor encouraged her to place “those [students] who need some help...[to] find friends...[to]makes pairs, so that they can learn from each other.” While observing Kathy for small group instruction, Kathy had difficulty with managing student talking within the groups. During Terry and Aubrey’s classroom observations, classroom management proved to not be an issue. There was no challenge for Terry in managing students within his classroom. As a special education co-teacher, Aubrey relied heavily on the classroom management practices of the co-teacher for general content.

Morgan discussed general Language Arts content with her mentor. Although Morgan used random student calling as a classroom management strategy that was advised from her

mentor, it was clear that Morgan and her mentor also discussed the type of questions to ask students. From actively listening during her mentoring conversation, Morgan instructed students to complete a graphic organizer of a story's characterization during her observation. The graphic organizer was supported by the questions that she asked students. Morgan's observation demonstrated that Morgan unknowingly implemented differentiated instruction in her lesson.

Terry discussed "group lesson, differentiated lessons" with his mentor. Terry desired to differentiate his lessons "because the students are on different learning levels." During Terry's classroom observation, students collaborated to complete an assignment. Although student group assignments were not differentiated, Terry demonstrated his active listening skills during his conversation with his mentor by ensuring the questions on the assignment were different for each group based on student academic level. Terry also displayed differentiated products of student assignments in his class. Terry's differentiated lesson and student artifacts provided equitable learning for his students.

To ensure special education students received equitable instruction, Aubrey discussed with her mentor how to read and interpret student Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) located in the school's learning management system. During Aubrey's classroom observation, Aubrey was observed documenting student behaviors and academic progress in compliance with their IEP accommodations. During lunch, it was observed that Aubrey communicated with other teachers concerning student progress to meet their IEP goals. Aubrey could be heard asking, "How did Johnathan (a pseudonym) do with his behavioral tracking sheet?" Aubrey's classroom practices were evidence of her actively listening during her conversations with her mentor.

Kathy also discussed the school's learning management and electronic payment systems with her mentor. As Kathy struggled with classroom management, it was not witnessed during

her classroom observation that she documented student misbehaviors. During lunch, where Kathy often ate a home lunch rather than a paid school lunch, teacher colleagues could be heard encouraging Kathy to document student misbehavior in the learning management system.

School related operations, instructional planning, and classroom management were topics of conversations for early career teachers. New teachers actively listened to their mentors provide classroom management strategies, instructional advice, and tips on school issues. Classroom management strategies were incorporated in early career teacher classroom practices with areas of improvement. Teacher mentor instructional advice was also implemented in new teacher classroom practices as a working progress. Active listening proved to be the most effective for school related operations as, although new teachers did not always incorporate their learning for classroom purposes, they were aware on how to follow school-based procedures discussed with their mentor.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this study, four overall themes emerged from the data analysis related to the research questions. Research Question 1 investigated early career teachers' thoughts about conversations with their mentor. The first theme described how early career teachers believed relationship building to be necessary for effective mentoring conversations. Early career teachers desired knowledgeable mentors with pleasant personality traits. The second theme explained the expectations of mentoring conversations for early career teachers. New teachers were eager for clear conversations that enhanced their understanding of teaching practices.

Research Question 2 investigated topics of conversations between early career teachers and their mentors. The third theme explored how classroom management, instructional planning, and school related operations were the most talked about topics of mentoring conversations for

early career teachers. Classroom management was the most talked about topic between new teachers and their mentors as new teachers were eager to receive counsel on how to manage their classrooms. Instructional planning was a vital topic of mentoring conversations as it helped new teachers with their classroom practices. Finally, school related operations were talked about in mentoring conversations to help new teachers with school-based matters.

Research Question 3 investigated how teachers used their mentoring conversations in their classroom practices. The fourth theme detailed how teachers governed their classrooms, implemented their lesson plans, and related school matters for effective classroom instruction.

Chapter 6 concludes with a summary of the study and discussion about the findings from the research questions. Implications and recommendations for current practices, as well as suggestions for future research are also discussed in this final chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The teacher shortage in the United States has continuously grown over time with the COVID-19 Pandemic placing a strenuous burden on the teacher workforce. As schools and school districts rely more on alternatively certified teachers (Rose & Sughrue, 2020), new teacher mentoring is imperative to improve teacher retention. Research positions that the “revolving door” of teachers decelerates with mentoring programs given that this type of support decreases teacher attrition by 12% compared to attrition in other professions (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Warsame & Valles, 2018).

New teacher mentoring provides physiological and pedagogical support by reducing stress and offering professional learning for early career teachers (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020). Teachers have reported mentoring to be one of the most important aspects of their first year in the profession because it decreases anxiety and it accelerates learning pedagogy (Richter et al., 2013). Educational leaders and policymakers are now investing time to improve new teacher mentoring programs across the nation so to decrease the teacher shortage (Roth & Harris, 2022; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Researchers have historically suggested to further study the transfer of mentoring conversations to early career teacher classroom practices as an improvement for mentoring programs (Strong & Baron, 2004).

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. The research aims to explore the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations.

Through semi-structured interviews and observation fieldnotes, the contributions of mentoring conversations from the perspectives of early career teachers were examined.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are early career teachers' perspectives about their conversations with their mentors?
2. What are the common topical areas that are talked about between early career teachers and their mentors?
3. How do early career teachers make meaning of mentoring conversations through their classroom practices?

This chapter provides a summary of the research design, discussion of the major themes related to the literature, and implications for future research, policy, and practice. The chapter ends with the researcher's concluding thoughts about the study.

### **Summary of Research Design**

The theoretical frameworks of this study were social constructivism and sensemaking theory. Specific aspects of mentoring conversations, such as content and transfer of content to classroom practices, were analyzed as “reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation” (Firestone, 1987, p. 5). In analyzing the transfer of content from mentoring conversations to early career teachers' classroom practices, the study captured how new teachers made sense of their mentoring experiences.

The research study used qualitative inquiry to seek understanding of subjective mentoring experiences, such as the dialogue between early career teachers and their mentors. Because qualitative inquiry “...emphasize[es] the “how”—procedures, techniques, practice—rather than the ‘what’ and the ‘why’” (Preissle, 2006, p. 690), a case study was the appropriate qualitative

inquiry strategy for this research. A case study investigates findings within a specific timeframe (Baskarada, 2014) by "...answer[ing] questions that the research does not have much control over the phenomenon studied" (Quintao et al., 2020, p. 274). This case study featured early career teachers within a middle school's mentoring program as they discussed various topics with their mentors. Interviews and classroom observation field notes were used for triangulation (Merriam, 2009).

Interviews were chosen as a primary data collection method for this case study because interviews offer an opportunity for participants to reveal their unique descriptions and meanings of a particular topic from their own perspectives (Merriam, 2009). Another source that was used to generate data for this study were field notes. Detailed notes from early career teacher classroom observations occurred in real time where the researcher was able to capture participants' actions and other details supporting the data from interview transcriptions (Tessier, 2012). The researcher recorded personal reactions, thoughts, and conclusions based on their subjectivity in a reflective dairy (Sanjek, 1990).

The data analysis process for this research study included organizing the data, coding the data, generating themes, and presenting the results. Data of early career teachers were reviewed and afterwards, examined holistically. The line-by-line coding technique was used to assist with comparing data (Freeman, 2017). Codes were developed from deductive and inductive reasoning (Bendassolli, 2013). After codes were created from data, the codes were sorted into generalized categories that were then developed into themes (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher wrote memos concerning self-reflection of interviews, participants, code choices, and themes (Saldaña, 2016). Memoing is a bridge between data collection and data analysis as the critical reflection in memos helps researchers find codes for themes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016).

An extensive review of literature concerning new teacher mentoring was the foundation of this study. The literature review focused on mentoring and its components, mentoring conversations, contexts of school supports, adult learning theory and the early career teacher, professional job embedded learning, and the roles of new teacher mentors. The next section discusses how the literature aligns to the findings of this case study.

### **Discussion of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program. Three research questions explored the meaning that early career teachers made of these conversations. Themes emerged from the data that addressed each research question. This section explores how the themes related to previous literature of new teacher mentoring.

#### *THEME 1: Relationship Building Is the Foundation of Mentoring Conversations*

The school district's new teacher mentoring program encourages local schools to assign mentors to new teachers. This case study found that while Cedarsville Middle School's New Teacher Mentoring Program delayed mentoring assignments from the beginning of the school year, early career teachers were assigned a content mentor and staff mentor. The content mentor was the new teachers' curriculum lead teacher, and the staff mentor was an experienced teacher, observed by the school's administration, who bonded or was perceived to bond well with the new teacher.

Participants acknowledged that the mentor who they sought frequent advice from was the teacher mentor who shared the most commonalities with them. Early career teachers seek relationships with colleagues who they deem are similar in personality and who can ultimately help satisfy their needs (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Shanks et al., 2020). By being surrounded

by like-minded people, such as in a mentoring relationship, new teachers have an opportunity for personal transformation or the ability to gain new understandings of teaching that eventually change their habits of mind (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Although new teachers at Cedarville Middle School were assigned two mentors, through the Personal Interpretive Framework, their selection of their primary mentor was based on their self-evaluation of professional needs that they wanted to acquire to enhance their self-image (März & Kelchtermans, 2020).

This case study also revealed that Cedarville Middle School's early career teachers and their mentors were provided opportunities throughout the academic year to bond, with the most notable event being the midyear celebration. Authentic relationship building supports sense of belonging that makes it easier for early career teachers to communicate and to seek support from their mentor (Bjorklund et al., 2020). Bjorklund et al. (2020) additionally promoted that a sense of belonging is a natural human need and contributes to a teacher's self-image. Participants reported that their mentors were supportive in their self-image and sense of belonging by always being "available" to talk about their teaching ability and progress.

Teacher mentors of Cedarville Middle School were required to check in with their new teacher mentees at least one time per week. These meetings provided informal settings where early career teachers could engage in unconscious learning about instructional practices (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). As adult learning is based on experiences and social roles, new teachers benefited from the informal learning as their learning occurred incidentally through conversations with their mentors (Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Participants confirmed that in addition to their mentors always being accessible for conversation, their mentors were "helpful" and "knowledgeable." Ewing (2021) found that early career teacher

mentors should be approachable, nonjudgmental, and efficient collaborators, who possess professional knowledge and provide resources.

The second theme further explained the perspectives of mentoring conversations from early career teachers.

*THEME 2: Mentoring Conversations Provide Clarity that Enhances Understanding*

Great Plains School District's mentoring program models expectations of mentoring conversations with new teachers through their training of their local schools' lead teacher mentors. Mentor teachers of Cedarsville Middle School's New Teacher Mentoring Program are expected to follow the school district's mentoring conversation protocols by formally meeting with early career teacher mentees at least three times a semester along with brief weekly informal meetings. Hong and Matsko (2019) concluded from their study of high-quality mentoring that biweekly meetings are ideal for effective mentoring and relationship building to transpire.

During the initial formal mentoring conversation at Cedarsville Middle School, professional learning goals of early career teachers were established. Zepeda et al. (2019) emphasized that often teachers and their support providers do not see goals the same and hence, conversations are needed where goals should be explicit, practical, and relevant to both educators. Participants revealed that they shared their goals and discussed how to meet their goals with their mentors.

It is important that teacher mentors also have an upfront discussion with early career teachers of mentee learning expectations from the mentoring relationship (Nolan & Molla, 2018). Participants reported their professional learning goal "checklist" introduced by mentors was beneficial for their professional growth. Zepeda et al. (2019) warned us that successes may

look different for early career teachers and their mentors and such a variety in measures of accomplishments need to be agreed on during early discussion. Participants discussed how their mentors modeled or “dissected a video” of their teaching to provide exemplars of teaching expectations.

During initial mentoring conversations, it is also a good time for teacher mentors to emphasize mentee confidentiality that supports risk-taking in professional learning (Nolan & Molla, 2018). Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) claimed teacher mentors should encourage new teachers to think about their teaching issues and engage in problem solving strategies through meaningful discussion. Participants reported that they believed they could “trust” their mentor with their discussions of various topics and were open to their mentors observing their classroom practices. Early career teacher participants were eager for mentor feedback of instructional inquiries and classroom observations.

Teacher mentors should plan conversations with the end goal in mind to support professional development for early career teachers (Zepeda et al., 2019). In essence, conversations should be clear, realistic, appropriate, flexible, and timely, more commonly referred to by Zepeda et al. (2019) as C.R.A.F.T conversations. Participants valued these conversations because they were purposeful and “did not waste their time” in helping them to understand how to meet their pedagogical goals.

The third theme explores topics of conversations between early career teachers and their mentors.

### *THEME 3: Topics of Mentoring Conversations Influence Teacher Efficacy*

A study on new teachers' perspectives of their mentors revealed the most talked about topics during mentoring conversations were pedagogy, classroom learning environments, and

student engagement (Grossman et al., 2012). Despite these topics, Grossman et al. (2012) concluded that the new teachers in their study wanted more help on classroom management, instructional planning, and modeling, or the act of observing their mentors teach.

As participants discussed conversations with their teacher mentors at Cedarsville Middle School, classroom management proved to be the most talked about topic in mentoring conversations, followed by instructional planning and school related operations. A study conducted by März and Kelchtermans (2020) revealed that new teachers' initial need for their first year of teaching is often not curriculum related, rather early career teachers seek relationships with colleagues who will help with urgent topics such as classroom management. Participants were concerned about processes to ensure students demonstrated good "behaviors" during class instruction. Hong and Matsko (2019) and Jones et al. (2019) found that most conversations between new teachers and their mentors occur after lesson implementation.

As mentor teachers discuss classroom management with new teachers after lesson implementations, they help early career teachers become aware of poor classroom management choices and ways to promote an environment with positive student behaviors (Hong & Matsko, 2019; März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018). Participants reported their mentors helped them enact change through critical reflection of modeling during observations and video analyses.

Participants were also interested on how to manage their class for "differentiated instruction", "small group instruction," and other "instructional strategies." When schools have a positive professional learning culture that is supportive of instruction, conversations between early career teachers and their mentors are based more on pedagogy rather than social emotions

(Grossman et al., 2012). All participants did not indicate emotional support as a topic of discussion with their mentors.

Lastly, school related operations were reported by participants as a topic of conversation with their mentors. Researchers attest that teacher mentors communicate with early career teachers concerning school operations, values, hierarchy of superiors, and administrator responsibilities (Anthony et al., 2019; Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017). Participants revealed that they discussed the school's student learning management system and documentation process for student individualized education plans with their mentors.

The fourth theme details how mentoring conversations transferred to early career teacher classroom practices.

#### *THEME 4: Active Listening During Mentoring Conversations Encourages Implementation of Classroom Practices*

How adults learn is important for new teacher mentoring because adult learning consists of having a choice of what is learned, how it is learned, and from what opportunities are presented (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). As new teachers at Cedarsville Middle School discussed their professional learning goals of classroom management and instructional planning, their active listening helped them transfer content to their classroom practices. Prasad (2018) supports that these conversations are subjective realities that are constructed together to produce new knowledge. Participants indicated that they attempted to transfer the content of their conversations with their mentors in their classroom instruction as they "needed to work on" or put into practice their topics of discussion.

As early career teachers at Cedarsville Middle School conducted their lessons and afterwards engaged in self-reflection of lesson implementation, they discussed their professional

learning goals with their mentors. According to adult learning theory, “there is a change in time perspective as people mature—from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application” (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). Participants revealed that they “talk[ed] to their mentors anytime” about issues of their teacher pedagogy after teaching a lesson and engaging in critical reflection.

New teachers of Cedarsville Middle School “trust[ed]” their mentors to provide them with sustainable advice, referred to by Nolan & Molla (2018) as knowledge transmission. Established trust helps early career teachers take risks of authentic classroom practices that ultimately help with student achievement (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Zepeda, 2020). Participants implied that when their implementation of the advice from their mentors failed during their classroom instruction, they revisited the topic of discussion with their mentors. According to the Mezirow’s Psychocritical Approach, early career teachers make sense of conversations with their mentors for future action (Mezirow, 2000).

### **Implications**

While studies have concluded induction and mentoring programs have a positive effect on teacher retention (Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Sutchter et al., 2019), there is little research about how these effects develop, especially within new teacher mentoring relationships. Therefore, the findings of this study have implications for further research, policy, school leader and teacher mentor practices related to early career teacher conversations in mentoring relationships. The major implications are discussed in this section.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

There are studies that show mentoring programs improve teacher retention (Glazerman et al, 2010; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Additional literature on teacher induction illustrates that

teacher mentors play a significant role in teacher retention as they contribute to continuous professional learning for new teachers (Schatz-Oppenheimer, 2017; Squires, 2019). Further study is needed on how such professional learning occurs for beginning teachers in their mentoring relationships. This case study illuminated potential avenues of new teacher professional development for research. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations for further study should be considered.

This case study found that active listening during mentoring conversations encourages implementation of classroom practices as participants attempted to implement topics in their instruction that were discussed with their mentor. There remains concern of how new teacher classroom practices are affected after exchange of classroom observations in addition to having conversations with their mentoring partner. A study by Grossman et al. (2012) concluded that new teachers wanted more professional development from modeling. Classroom observations, including video recorded observations, conducted by new teachers and their mentor teachers may provide an opportunity for modeling and constructivist-oriented mentoring, a learning process where mentor and mentee construct learning together (Richter et al., 2013). Constructivist-oriented mentoring may ultimately lead to additional mentoring discussions that are intricate and timely. Further study of new teacher mentors' perspectives of mentoring conversations and observations may provide more insight for effective mentoring practices.

This case study also found that classroom management, instructional planning, and school related operations were topics of conversation. As constructivist-oriented mentoring has its benefits for new teachers, more research is needed on the different effects of mentoring and academic coaching for early career teachers. Mentor teachers may behave as academic coaches for new teachers. While mentoring offers social and emotional support (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020),

Al Hilali et al. (2020) described coaching as an individual using a skill set to improve an organization's outcome. Academic coaching from mentor teachers provide more supportive relationship among new teachers and administrators for effective teacher evaluations (Mette et al., 2017) and a positive school culture. Comparing teacher attrition of schools with mentor teachers to schools with mentor teachers *and* academic coaches may shed light on teacher retention and provide insight on student achievement for affluent and impoverished schools.

Lastly, this case study found that relationship building is the foundation of mentoring conversations. Further study may consist of a longitudinal study of a school's cohort of new teachers as they matriculate in the school's new teacher mentoring program. Such research may study participants of a three-year mentoring program with the same mentor to potentially reveal areas of need for new teachers based on their teacher preparation backgrounds and how mentoring provided professional development for these areas regarding teacher retention.

#### *Implications for Policy*

Educational leaders who work to implement effective mentoring policies help to improve new teacher retention (Warsame & Valles, 2018). Past implementations of teacher mentoring initiatives have led to current ideas of new teacher induction policies. Findings of this case study highlighted how mentoring conversations transfer to early career teacher classroom practices. Based on the finding of the study, the following recommendations for policy should be considered.

In agreement with Redding and Nguyen (2020), this case study revealed that mentor teachers in the new teacher mentoring program complained about the lack of time available for them to engage in mentoring. It is recommended that school districts invest in district level mentor teachers that work at the local schools. These mentor teachers could act as liaisons in

ensuring new teachers uphold the expectations of district teacher guidelines while also carrying out the mission of their schools. This recommendation is an opportunity cost for school level mentors who are larger in number to train and pay and have less time than hired district level mentor teachers (Baker, 2018).

For cost efficiency, school districts may consider investing in Ewing's (2021) suggestion of educational leaders hiring retired educators as full or part-time early career teacher mentors. School district full or part-time teacher mentors could be differentiated and assigned to local schools based on the number of new teacher hires and their teacher preparation backgrounds. This type of initiative could connect to school principal accountability in ensuring improved new teacher retention.

It is recommended that school principals invest more time in their school's new teacher mentoring program as a byproduct of teacher professional development. This case study implied that because teachers believed the principal did not care about them, such lack of organizational trust (The Center for Educational Effectiveness, 2023) affected new teachers through negligence of social and emotional support, support that Grossman et al. (2012) declared must be established before instructional support. As a result, stress of pedagogical expectations developed and therefore perpetuated a revolving door of new teachers who were inexperienced in mentoring other new teachers.

Research reveals that early career teachers' decisions to remain at their school are connected to principal leadership and their impact for a positive school culture (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Kutsyuruba et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2019). In fact, a focus area of United States Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona is to invest in strategies to retain high-quality educators. Under his direction, the U.S. Department of Education commits to providing teachers with

resources, such as mentoring for early career teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). As suggested by Kutsyuruba et al. (2020), it is recommended that educational policymakers continue to provide funds to educational leaders for mentor training to leverage positive school cultures that encourage sense of belonging.

Finally, it is recommended that education departments in state colleges and universities collaborate with school systems for additional teacher residency programs. A participant of this study was a teacher fellow for Great Plains School District (a pseudonym) at the University of North Georgia (UNG). Similar to the program at UNG, additional residency programs would incentivize teacher applicants as teachers will receive pay for their in-field teacher preparation (University of North Georgia, 2023). Teacher candidates will, more importantly, receive university mentoring as well as local school mentoring for their professional development.

#### *Implications for Mentor Teachers*

Teacher mentoring cannot be effective without the mentor teacher. This case study focused on mentor actions, specifically mentoring conversations between early career teachers and their mentors. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for mentor teacher practice should be considered.

This case study found that when mentor teachers in the mentoring program were asked to document their formal mentoring conversations, mentor teachers lacked knowledge of topics to discuss with new teachers as well as when and how to discuss these topics. It is recommended that mentor teachers participate in mentor training to provide effective mentoring to new teachers. First, mentor teachers should be trained on how to become acquainted with their new teacher mentee by showing interests in their background and past accomplishments (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020).

Second, mentor teachers should be trained in initiating purposeful discussions with their early career teacher partners (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Zepeda et al., 2019). Such conversations may promote critical reflection and inquiry through communication techniques (Beek et al., 2019; Glanz & Zepeda, 2016; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Strong & Barron, 2004). The case study indicated that mentor teachers engaged in knowledge transmission rather than knowledge transformation with their early career teacher mentees (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Nolan & Molla, 2018). It is recommended that communication techniques be discussed during mentor training.

Lastly, through purposeful conversations, mentor teachers should be trained on how and when to provide meaningful feedback (Ambrosetti, 2014; Beek et al., 2019). The case study revealed that mentor teachers discussed a checklist of professional learning goals with their new teacher mentees without initially explaining the meaning of the goals. Adult learning theory is recommended to be incorporated in mentor training to help mentor teachers understand how adults learn and their role in the mentoring relationship throughout the school year (Knowles, 1980; Long et al., 2012).

This case study also shared that mentor teachers lacked participating in the mentoring program as mentor teachers were assigned more than one new teacher mentee. While this may have been the result of many new teachers at the school, it is recommended that mentor teachers are offered pay for their mentoring efforts. Waterman and He (2011) found that without pay for mentor teachers, teacher retention declined. Such pay could act as an incentive for mandated mentor training for mentor teachers.

### *Implications for School Leaders*

Research ultimately reveals that early career teachers remain at their schools based on principal leadership and positive school culture (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Kutsyuruba et al., 2020; Zepeda et al., 2019). This case study focused on a new teacher mentoring program created by school administration to support mentoring conversations. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations for school leader practice should be considered.

First, early career teachers benefit from their mentoring conversations if there is a strong relationship between them and their mentor. This case study found that from two assigned formal mentors by school administration, new teachers chose to converse with the mentor where there was a stronger connection. These mentors were friends and colleagues who taught different content areas and grade levels. It is imperative that school leaders do not make assumptions on bonds between new teachers and their mentors. Such assumptions can lead to early career teachers not receiving effective mentoring due to friendliness that is unfavorable to pedagogical constructive criticism, lack of subject specific instructional knowledge, or time restrictions on help from mismatched schedules.

Second, it is recommended that school leaders collaborate with staff mentors, who have participated in mentor training, to select their new teacher mentee from early career teachers' prior knowledge and experience. Through the Personal Interpretive Framework, explained by März and Kelchtermans (2020), early career teachers engage with mentors through self-understanding and their professional knowledge from teacher preparation. Early career teachers must believe they can professionally benefit from their mentor, or they will seek informal teacher mentors (Shanks et al., 2020). As mentor teachers are trained on relationship building, after selecting their mentee based on their own experience and the new teacher's professional learning

needs, mentor teachers must use their training to create and nurture a relationship with their new teacher peer.

Additionally, a critical note to point out, this case study revealed that school leaders waited to assign formal mentors to new teachers after 30% of the school year had passed. This delay in mentor assignments resulted in early career teachers missing valuable time in building a relationship with their formal mentor and critical information for the start of the year. Additionally, new teachers were not able to receive emotional and social support during their initial transition to teaching. Emotional and social support must be established before instructional support is effective (Grossman et al., 2012). Such support was not found in this case study as a topic for mentoring conversations.

Second, as found in this case study, school leaders are encouraged to differentiate mentor assignments by providing early career teachers with a curriculum and staff mentor. Principals have the autonomy to implement distributed leadership among the school that offers early career teachers more structure in seeking help from mentors (Anthony et al., 2019). Facilitating a new teacher mentoring program that caters to cohorts of new teachers would be beneficial to early career teachers because early career teachers begin their teaching career at different stages of development with different needs (Hong & Matsko, 2019).

Each cohort may create its own integrated professional learning community for early career teachers to build relationships with different teacher peers within the group to meet their individualized professional development (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; Sikma, 2019; Strong, 2009; Thessin, 2017). In addition to differentiated new teacher cohorts, principals may facilitate a new teacher mentoring program that offers other “packaged” supports such as teacher collaboration schedules where teachers may model, observe, and co-teach with their mentoring

peer and incentives for participation in mentoring activities (Hong & Matsko, 2019; Nolan & Molla, 2018; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Shanks et al., 2020).

Lastly, this case study found that one of the most talked about topics in mentoring conversations was school related operations. While school related operations were discussed by all early career teachers in this case study, more of these operations were discussed by new teachers who had no prior teacher preparation experience. In agreement with Grossman et al. (2012), it is recommended that school principals seek hiring of quality new teachers who are pedagogically prepared as the mentoring conversations will be based more on pedagogy rather than other topics. There remain concerns on recruitment of teachers to traditional and alternative certification programs so to increase highly qualified teachers in the teacher workforce pipeline.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The number of qualified teacher candidates in the United States have decreased in comparison to past years, further perpetuating a national teacher shortage. While teacher alternative certification programs are becoming more prevalent for early career teachers, new teacher mentoring is a sustainable solution to improving teacher retention as mentoring offers beginning teachers psychological and pedagogical support. Unfortunately, topics discussed in mentoring conversations for new teacher classroom practices need more attention to enhance new teacher mentoring programs.

Before mentoring conversations become meaningful, early career teachers need mentors who have compatible personalities and share commonalities in job related tasks, such as teaching the same subject or grade level. Teacher mentoring must start as soon as new teachers enter their classrooms so to provide new teachers with guidance on urgent topics such as classroom management, instructional planning, school related operations, and, most importantly, emotional

wellness. Schools with a positive professional learning environment must use experienced mentor teachers to invite new teachers to engage in authentic risk taking for professional development.

Positive professional learning environments that support authentic risks for professional growth are established by school leaders who support new teacher induction. School leadership is the most important factor of new teacher mentoring as school principals facilitate mentor training, mentor assignments, and encourage mentoring conversations that reflect the school's mission and vision. With lack of support from the school principal, the new teacher mentoring program will not be as effective for teacher job satisfaction and retention, resulting in a stressful working environment without sense of belonging.

Encouraging a sense of belonging is the heart of new teacher mentoring as it is a human need to feel valued and to have purpose. Mentor teachers support a sense of belonging not only through conversations but also through peer classroom observations. It is imperative that as educational leaders and policymakers work to improve teacher retention through professional development that they focus on funding for new teacher mentor capital and training. An emphasis on the number of teacher mentors and strategic planning of their placements based on new teacher hires and their teacher preparation backgrounds has the potential to decrease teacher attrition.

The continuation of teacher attrition will negatively impact the nation's K-12 educational system. As educational leaders and policymakers continue to work together to enhance teacher professional development, school principals must work with their teacher leaders to ensure new teacher mentoring programs are supportive of new teacher needs through effective mentoring

conversations. This endeavor is a diligent effort of all experienced school leaders, teachers, and other educators as we must commit to ensuring our efforts conserve a vibrant teacher workforce.

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## Appendix A

### Perspectives and Conversational Topics of Mentoring Conversations Interview Questions

First, I would like to thank you for consenting to this interview concerning your perspective on mentoring conversations with your teacher mentor. Let's start with a discussion of your teaching and mentoring experiences.

1. Where did you go to college?
2. Why did you decide to become a teacher?
3. How long have you been teaching?
4. What are your thoughts about teaching thus far?

So, let's look directly at your mentoring experiences:

5. What makes an effective mentor?
6. What do you like about your mentor?
7. What are the topics that you discuss with your mentor?
8. How have these topics been useful in your classroom practices?
9. What do you think about the conversations with your mentor?
10. Describe the role of conversations in your mentoring relationship.
11. What have been your best experiences with your mentor?
12. What have been your worst experiences with your mentor?
13. How does your mentor compare to your idea of a perfect mentor?

14. How would you mentor new teachers?
  
15. What would you do differently as a mentor to new teachers?
  
16. What strategies would you recommend a mentor use in working with new teachers?
  
17. What other information would you like to share concerning your perspectives about conversations with your mentor teacher?
  
18. Do you have any questions for me?

## Appendix B

### Participant Consent Letter

Dear Participant,

My name is Sharon Hutchins, and I am a Ph.D. student in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research case study entitled, “Help! I need to talk to my teacher mentor: Exploring early career teachers’ perspectives on mentoring conversations”. The purpose of this study is to examine teacher mentor actions, specifically through the conversations between early career teachers and their mentors within a mentoring program.

Your contributions will involve participating in an interview and being the subject of a classroom observation. The interview will address thoughts on conversations within your mentoring relationship and topical areas of conversation discussed with your mentoring teacher. The interview will be appropriately 60 minutes. The observations will capture your classroom practices that support your interview responses. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you have the right to not respond to any interview questions. Moreover, you may discontinue participation in the study at any time.

To protect your privacy, no individually identifiable information will be shared with others. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity. The researcher will be the only individual with access to the study’s data. Recorded interviews will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this research project except becoming aware of the importance of teacher mentoring as it relates to teacher retention. Additionally, this case study is intended to provide a starting point for educational leaders and policymakers in seeking perspectives and strategies to enhance teacher mentoring to improve teacher attrition. There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study.

If you have any questions about this case study, please feel free to contact Sharon Hutchins at (XXX) XXX-XXX or send an email to [sharon.hutchins@uga.edu](mailto:sharon.hutchins@uga.edu). Sally J. Zepeda, the study’s principal investigator, may also be contacted at [szepeda@uga.edu](mailto:szepeda@uga.edu). Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at (706) 542-5969 or [irb@uga.edu](mailto:irb@uga.edu).

You should retain a copy of this letter and your written consent for future reference. Please return this letter to [sharon.hutchins@uga.edu](mailto:sharon.hutchins@uga.edu).

Thank You for your time! Your participation in this research study is greatly appreciated!

Sincerely,

Sharon Hutchins

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.**